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WYOMING GUNS

By BRAD WARD

WYOMING GUNS

By BRAD WARD

One slick ranny was playing the outlaw game to the hilt—lining up nesters, rustlers and Wyoming's notorious, law-dodgin' gunslingers against the land-rich cattle barons. Blade Talbot, tall man of the Tallows, spotted the sneak play, and unsheathed his long-idle guns for the hot-lead holocaust that would leave no man untouched.

THE town had gone outlaw; the first five minutes in Tall Pine convinced Blade Talbot of that fact. He rode through in a snow flurry. Wind gushed about him, ruffling the sheepskin collar of his coat, and the heavy moist snow deadened all sound. He passed three men. All three were known outlaws. Yep, trouble was brewing in the Red Wall country. Big trouble.

Blade halted his mount at the hitchrail before the Selby House. The yellow lights of the hotel spilled soft glows through the falling snow. The snow was the first of the winter, and the dead cold of night had not as yet set in.

Blade turned his horse around to the side where the stables were. A lantern hung in the doorway. A man stood there smoking a cigarette and staring out at the snow. He saw Blade and stiffened a little.

"Early this year," the man said.

Blade caught his meaning. "Yeah. Won't hurt none. Give him some grain."

The man nodded. Blade pulled his coat loose on his long-boned frame, and his gloved hands swung loosely at his sides. He was tall; that was the first impression. But he lacked the leanness of a horseman, although not the hardness. His shoulders were big, thickly padded, and his chest heavy. He moved with a deliberateness that was deceptive. He was light on his feet, capable of fast movement when the urge drove him. His face in the lantern light was sallow, the darkness of the summer sun not yet worn away into winter redness. His eyes were almost olive green. His nose was prominent, almost hawklike. His mouth did nothing to soften the hardness, a firm, straight line above a blunted chin.

"Ain't none of my business, Blade," the hostler began.

"You're right the first time," Talbot cut in, and swung away. Irritation from the long cold wet ride from the High Dome made his voice scratchy. He was in no mood for the usual warnings against being in Tall Pine. A man who rode the swalebacks of the Tallows for twenty miles against the snowy wind was ground to a metallic sharpness.

Blade felt that, and was aware of the growing edge of his temper.

He stomped his feet, and sharp lines of stiffness ran through him. He liked to say it was a sign of getting old, but didn't believe it. No man believes he is getting old.

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JACK BYRNE, Managing Editor

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SUMMER, 1953

TWO WESTERN-ACTION BOOKS

25¢

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO WESTERN-ACTION BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT YOUR NEWSSTANDS AUGUST 15, 1953

And Blade Talbot was three years under forty.

The Selby House door swung wide as he came across the porch. He blinked in the light for a moment, and the woman standing there smiled at him. The smile was unreal at first, a prop of welcome to the casual rider. It changed, imperceptibly, as she recognized him.

"Hello, Blade." Her voice was low, almost cultured. Her face was oval, with thin lines of strain about the full-lipped mouth. Shadows crowded her dark eyes, veiling them of expression.

"Howdy, Marl," he answered, and stepped inside, shrugging his shoulders to loose the snow. The heat of the room made his face burn. His eyes narrowed, then widened, and in that space of time he caught the room, the men in it, and fixed them in his mind. It was an old trick, and one he had never forgotten.

"You're welcome here— always, Blade," she said, as if reading his thought.

"Thanks, Marl. I know that."

"Do you, Blade?" Her eyes were wide. Her mouth curled slightly. Then the moment passed. "Have a drink?"

"Sure." He moved after her across the wide room. A bar stood against the far wall. As he came up to it, he heard a woman's giggle from upstairs. He looked at the stairs, then swung his eyes deliberately back to the bar. The bartender came up, then backed away as Marl Wright slipped behind the bar. She bent, caught a tall black bottle, brought it up. She stood two glasses beside it.

"That's Belle upstairs," she said, slowly. "It isn't Tod she's with."

He poured whiskey into the two glasses. A thin film of bead, top-smoke in amber, spread through the liquid. He picked up her glass, handed it to her, then raised his own. "You, Marl," he said, and drank the liquor. She didn't taste hers, but set the glass down.

"You shouldn't be here," she said. "You know that. Things change. They're changing now, too fast for you. You don't realize you're not wanted here. They feel you're against them. A man can't straddle a fence in a blizzard, Blade."

"He can always try," Talbot returned. "Thanks for the drink, Marl."

She let her face sag a little. She looked suddenly old, drained. "All rock. Hard rock, to break a bit on. It takes dynamite to crack hard rock, and that's what somebody'll use."

"It can blow two ways, Marl."

"You think I don't know that? You think I don't see what's in a man's eyes when he speaks your name? But being afraid of you isn't enough. Blade Talbot of the High Dome. The tall man. That's you. Chinker Kaye was in here two nights ago. He was drunk. He said he sat on the rim of the Tallows, and lined you up in the sights of his Henry. He talked about it. Said it could be done, no matter what a man said about you."

"But he didn't pull the trigger."

"No, he didn't—and God knows why. He hates you enough. But he has to wait to see what you'll do. He knows—every man in Pine knows—but they'll wait. Only they won't wait too long. You've got to move to one side or the other, Blade."

"Sure, but not right now." He swung away from the bar, then turned back, waited. Her face was intent. Slowly she shook her head.

"All right, Blade," she said. "You don't have to ask me. I'll tell you. Tod was here two hours ago. He was drunk. He's down at Brant's. He's got a girl there."

"Thanks, Marl," he said. He turned around, buttoning his coat collar tight, and walked out. The wind was sharp, the snow flurrying, beginning to pile into drifts against buildings. He turned to the left and walked close to the buildings. In the thickening snow his boots made no sound. A man walked past him, a blurred, white-rimmed figure. Then more yellow light burst out, and he paused. Noise came through the thin planked walls, a jumble of sound. Talbot shouldered the door open.

The saloon was crowded. Men were grouped around tables and at the long black bar.

Smoke curled and hung in a bluish haze. A woman's spangled dress sent bright darts through the murk where she stood beside a battered piano. The player was holding up a stein of beer with one hand, dogging a rhythm with the other.

TALBOT moved to the bar. A man turned, then stepped to one side to make room for him. His face was bearded, his eyes shaded by lowered lids. Blade knew him.

"Hello, Ben," he said.

"Howdy, Blade," the man said, and backed away from the bar. He walked over towards the far wall. Blade stepped up to the bar. When the bartender came up, he held up one finger. The man nodded, set a bottle up on the bar. Blade poured a drink, then turned, put his back against the bar, braced both elbows against it. He surveyed the room closely, and it seemed to him a thinning hush came upon the crowded room. A smile cracked the harshness of his lips.

"Looking for me, Talbot?"

He hadn't seen Charley Brant come up. The man was big, going to fat. His face was red, and his brocaded vest intensified the color.

"Hello, Brant. Have a drink?"

"Not now." Brant waited. Talbot just stared at him. Some of the color left his face, and Brant licked his lips. "Look, Talbot, Todd's old enough to know his own mind. He's a man grown, having a little fun—"

"If he's upstairs go get him."

Brant hesitated. "Ben—go tell Tod his old man's here and wants him."

Talbot watched Ben go to the stairs at the back of the room, and he raised his whiskey glass to his mouth. He sipped the whiskey, lowered the glass. Brant stood there, staring at him.

In a minute Charley came back. He was grinning and made no effort to lower his voice.

"Tod says you can go to hell, Talbot!"

The room stilled. The woman in the spangled dress laughed, and the sound came tearing into the thick smoky silence. Brant stepped forward in front of Blade.

"No trouble, Blade. If Tod wants to stay here, he stays."

Talbot moved across the room to the stairs. He went up them slowly. The hall upstairs was lighted, and he heard a man's laughter. He turned toward the sound. A girl in a black dress was sprawled across the bed, her long, black-stockinged legs exposed where her dress rose up. A man stood in the center of the room, laughing. He was tall, slender, with a handsome, willful face. He was very drunk.

When Blade came into the room the girl sat up and pulled her dress down. The boy —he was no more than that—turned slowly. His blond hair fell across his eyes. He blinked at Blade, then laughed again.

"Looky who's here!" he chortled. "The tall man himself. Howdy, Blade! Zena's got a friend and I got a bottle. We'll make a night of it."

"Get your coat on, Tod," Blade ordered. "We're riding back to the Dome tonight."

The laughter died in the boy's face, and brutal arrogance flooded it. "The hell you say! You're not my dad—to hell with you! I've been wantin' to say that for a long time—now it's said. To hell with you!"

Blade Talbot moved with deceptive slowness. His paw of a hand curled into a fist, thwacked against the youth's jaw. Tod dropped backward to the floor. Talbot caught the girl with one hand as she flung herself at him. He cuffed at her face.

"Leave him alone. I won't tell you again." She fell back across the bed, breathing hard, her black eyes flashing hate. "Now get his coat."

For a moment she held there, then slowly she shrugged. "I didn't know he was a baby." She got the heavy mackinaw, and Talbot picked Tod up, forced his arms into the sleeves. He buttoned it over his chest, then hoisted Tod to his left shoulder.

He came down the stairs with his right hand through the slit in his sheepskin coat. He stopped at the bottom, and his eyes pinned Brant. The big man held very still. "Brant—I'm only going to tell you this once. If I catch Tod in here again—if you even sell him one drink—I'm going to wreck this place, and you too."

He crossed the room to the door, and no one moved. He opened the door. As he slammed it behind him, he caught the tearing laughter of the woman in the spangled dress.

II

THE thunder of the slamming door sent a shiver through the wall behind Nate Chantelle's back. He pushed his chair down

from the wall, letting the flat of his feet take his weight. Then he rocked the chair back and forth on its hind legs, watching the room, sensing the humor of its occupants. Brant jerked towards the bar, dumped whiskey into a glass, downed it neat. His fatting face was red with suffused blood, and his mouth twisted nastily. But it wasn't Brant alone that worried Nate. It was the others, the sheep to be led if Brant so chose. Of course, the time wasn't yet right, but it wouldn't be too long, the way tempers were beginning to fray around the edges. And some damnfool play of Blade Talbot's could set the whole Red Wall afire.

Nate knew that Blade had seen him; had balanced the act of speaking to him against the pressing urgency of the moment, and had decided against it. And yet their eyes had met for an instant, and a message was exchanged. Nate let his legs take his weight, swingingly, and he hummed a light tune. If anything was going to happen, it would have happened before now. And, inside him, Nate sensed that Brant wasn't the man to start the ball rolling. Brant could take an order, could back down or stand up to another man, as his own mind dictated; but he lacked the driving force to sustain him in ordering others. For that it required a man like Blade Talbot, or a man like Nate Chantelle.

The thought pleased Nate. He was too much a cynic to accept his own reputation at face value; he knew his own limitations and foibles too well for that. But more and more, as things came to a head, men were turning to him. In a sense he was flattered by the respect paid him; but his real appreciation had a deeper meaning than that. Nate Chantelle—he pronounced it "Shawn-tell" —was forty-eight years old; and for thirty years he had been an outlaw. As a member of Quantrell's guerrillas he had accepted the general amnesty, and for a brief months had ridden a free man; but the betrayal of that amnesty had not caught him offguard. He had returned to outlawry with a mental shrug, and grim determination to last as long as he might. For that reason he had avoided contact with other and perhaps better known members of Quantrell's riders; he had never ridden with the James boys, nor had he formed an outlaw group of his own. But once in his life had he been a member of an outlaw gang, and that once he did not regret. A grim smile tugged at his lower lip.

His reputation named him as the most dangerous man in Wyoming Territory; and that was enough for him to judge the rest of it as half-truth, for he knew a more dangerous man had just outfaced Charley Brant and hauled young Tod Breen home to the High Dome. He thought of Blade again, and his smile deepened, then faded away beneath the droop of his yellow mustache as Brant came across the room toward him. He let the chair drop to all four legs and stood up. Brant stopped some feet away from him.

"You see that?" he demanded.

Nate nodded. "I saw. Tod's his kid. Has been for fifteen years."

"Who the hell don't know that?" Brant's fat face jerked. "Nate, this town is closed to the big ranchers. We closed it. This is a free town, and no range hogs are going to take it over. And Blade Talbot, the biggest rancher in the Territory, rides in like he owns it."

"Maybe he does, Brant," Nate said. "I didn't see anybody disputing the fact with him."

"But you will!" Brant was strung too far. He caught himself. "You know him. You've known him a long time. You can talk to him. Tell him to keep his troubles on the Dome. He's not wanted in Pine."

"Nope," Nate answered slowly. "Tell him that yourself. I've never had a bit of temptation to face Blade when he's riled up. I ain't got none now."

Brant groaned. "If you won't who the hell will?"

"It's your problem, Brant."

"Yes." Brant suddenly grinned. "What the hell? One hard nut won't stop us."

"I guess not."

Brant's lackluster eyes narrowed. "I don't savvy you, Nate. Fence-straddlin' ain't your suit. I thought we could count on you."

"That's nice. I'd like to be counted on by somebody. But I ain't digging my grave with my mouth. Things are working along fine the way they are."

"Like hell. Me for one, I'm gettin' sick an' tired of it. You think the bigwig land-

hogs are goin' to sit by 'an let the nesters multiply? Like hell! Come spring—" Brant broke off. "You'll see."

"I'm meaning to." Nate was amused. "Brant, like all the rest here in Tall Pine, you talk too damn much. Sure, I know Blade Talbot; I've known him a long time, same as I've known some others like Butch Cassidy and Dolo Clark. But I never owned a cow or an inch of land in my life. It's too late for me to start in now."

Brant nodded, slowly. "Just the same, I ain't heard Talbot squawking about losing cattle either, Nate."

"Nope, an' as far as I'm concerned it ain't likely you will, either. First place, Blade's a friend of mine. Second place, he hung the last three fellers who tried to change the High Dome into a Hat brand. I got a good memory about hangings. I remember 'em a long time. Strikes me some others around here would do well to think about it, too."

Chantelle settled back in his chair. Brant returned to the bar without replying, but Nate had seen the telltale tightening of his lips. He closed his eyes thoughtfully. There always came a time when a man chose up sides. Blade Talbot was facing it now—the same as Nate Chantelle. The hell of it was, they'd be forced to opposite sides, and then—

Nate frowned, and his hands dropped naturally to his guns, then fell slack at his sides once more.

OUTSIDE, with the snow brushing cold fingers against his face, Blade Talbot paused, a frown growing between his eyes. Loose snow made hellish going, and the Tallows were rough. With a drunken man in the saddle, it would be impossible. He cursed under his breath, then stomped down the boardwalk. As he came up to the Selby House, he paused, then kicked the door open and came inside.

Marl Wright was at the bar, and she came around the end of it quickly. Her face was smiling welcome at him, and he grinned back.

"Got a bed I can rent for the night, Marl?" he asked.

"For you or the kid?"

"The kid."

The woman's eye didn't waver. "Sure. Petey, take him upstairs."

A big Mexican moved up, and Blade let him take the boy's weight. He straightened, shrugged the snow from his shoulders. Marl was looking at the dark bruise on Tod's chin, the thin line of blood oozing from his lips.

"Did you have to hit him, Blade?" she asked.

"What makes you think so?"

"Just wondered." She shrugged. She watched the big Mexican carry the boy up the stairs. "He's getting too old for diapers, Blade. Can't you see that?"

"That's the way everybody puts it. I'm not babying him. I just don't want trouble. I don't want trouble for Tod. He's young enough to learn. And he's going to."

"Who pinned the badge on you? He's not your kid."

"I like to think he is."

"Do you feel the same way about Maudie?"

"The same way, Marl. But we won't talk about her here."

The woman's wan face flushed. "Sure, Blade, sure. A gentleman doesn't talk about a lady in a joint like mine."

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it." She shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"Maybe none." He pulled out of his sheepskin coat and moved to an empty table. He sat down, and after a moment's hesitation, Marl came over to him. The thin-edged barrier of anger was between them; both sensed it, but it was Marl who broke first, and stretched a hand across the table.

"I'm sorry, Blade."

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I think there is. I've no call to ride you; you've got enough trouble of your own, even if you can't see it that way."

"I have no troubles, Marl." His smile came, slowly. It effected a marked change in his sharp-featured face, broke some of the hardness.

"Glad to hear it, Blade. Chayme Baxter wouldn't like it, though. He thinks he's big trouble, for you and everybody else south of the Wind River."

"Chayme isn't bothering me."

"Not yet." She stopped there, although she caught the quick stiffening of his

shoulders, the dimming of his smile.

He shook his head slowly. "You say the damndest things, Marl! Chinker Kaye drawing a bead on my spine; Brant waiting to chew my arms off; now it's Chayme Baxter. Why not Virgie Thompson as well? He's the king-pin of the ranchers, if you think I'm siding the other way."

She shook her head in return, her smile fixed, almost sad. "You've got nothing to worry about with Thompson as long as Beth's his daughter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?"

"Sure, I get your hunch. I've known Beth Thompson almost as long as I've known Maudie. You know how I feel about her."

"I know. But Beth isn't your kid. You didn't raise her like you raised Maudie and Tod Breen."

"That makes a difference?" He laughed. "Hell, Marl I'm pushing middle-age. Beth's a kid. Barely twenty."

"You mean that, don't you, Blade?" Her smile faded. She frowned. "God help you when you wake up. You're like any other cowhand, always dragging in strays. Your heart's bigger than your head. You're likely to get both busted for you."

She stood up, suddenly, and he read anger with him in her eyes. "Goodnight, Blade. You'll be riding in again. Nothing can stop the tall man when he wants to ride into Tall Pine. I'll cry at your funeral, Blade." She moved away, hesitated, then came back. "You won't want to go upstairs. There's a bunk in the office. Pete will give you the keys. Goodnight."

"'Night." He watched her go. His eyes seemed to blur a little, and the warmth of the room made his head spin. Talking with Marl usually gave him satisfaction, a sense of friendship that was lacking tonight. There was a coldly sardonic streak in her, and he felt the full force of it. He rubbed one hand over his eyes, then poured another drink. He downed it and stood up. The stiffness had set in hard. Getting old, he thought, then grinned.

PETE came up at his call, led the way into Marl's office. He closed the door, sat down on the bed, dropped back against the pillows to rest a minute, and fell into a deep sleep. He wasn't aware of Marl coming into the room, standing over him, staring down at him, nor did he feel the blanket she drew over him. As silently as she had come, she left the room.

She motioned to Pete to close up, waited while he locked the front door. She paused at the stairs, listening. A girl laughed, hoarsely, and Marl's face went crooked. Only for a moment, then she shrugged the thought away, and made her way back to the kitchen. She was pouring coffee into a tin cup when Pete came into the room. The big Mexican was grinning.

"You like trouble, you damned heathen, don't you?" she demanded.

Pete nodded quickly. "Si, ama!" His shoulders moved in a quick shrug. "Bot thees time—"

"This time it's real trouble, is that what you mean?".

"Yes." He waited. His high-boned face was rocklike when he wasn't smiling, and for the moment he was serious.

"You hear all the talk, Pete. Tell me."

He shrugged again. "Bot what ees there to tell you do not already know? Thees Tallows—big trouble walk een soon. Ever'body say thees same theeng. Bot when, nobody knows. Señor Chantelle, purty queeck he ees goeeng to take one side or the other. No more stealeeng the few cattle; no! Bastante! It ees enough of thees game. Now comes the beeg play. And Señor Baxter, the other ranchers—perhaps Don Blade—they weell take no more. Bot who knows? Quien sabe? There ees beeg talk. Señor Brant, he ees make thees town wide open, no? The nesters they trade nowhere bot here. The rostlers, the malo hombres, the cattle thieves—weeth the Hole-In-The-Wall to get away through—eet weell mean mucho trouble! Si, no es verdad?"

She nodded slowly. She felt the gathering of forces, the stirring of currents tensing to rip the Red Wall into factions, strew trouble broadside through this harsh Wyoming land. The growing strength of the nesters, the squatters, the land-takers, within the law; and the big ranchers, with herds grown far too large to be supported by their own land holdings, fighting back to keep the range open. The pattern was as old as the West itself; but with a marked difference this

time. The Red Wall country had been outlaw territory for fifty years.

Every badman of repute in the West had holed up in some mud-walled shebang there. The Hole-in-the-Wall, the single pass through the tortuous fifty mile length of the Red Wall itself; the escape route, the keystone to the whole Outlaw Trail that ran three thousand miles, from Canada to Mexico, from the Dakotas to Oregon. And the nesters, with no law to turn to but that of their own making, were siding with them. In the coming year Wyoming Territory would achieve Statehood; it was common talk. But the continuing strife between rustler and nester and rancher would come to a head long before then.

Men would die in these bleak hills. It would be a struggle of a magnitude unseen before in the West. The Lincoln County War of ten years before would be child's play in comparison. Her frown grew stronger, and her coffee seemed suddenly bitter. She threw it out. She felt old, tired. Men like Chayme Baxter and Virgie Thompson and Blade Talbot would have to fight. There was no other way. For Blade the choice would be hard; he had never been a part of the Cattlemen's Group. His friendship with Nate Chantelle, perhaps others of the Owlhoot fraternity, was known. And it would mark him, set him apart from the others whose path must be marked plain from the beginning. No matter which way he chose to stand, he would be marked.

"The damned, stubborn fool!" she whispered, then confused by her own vehemence, and the sudden sharpness of the emotion she felt, she hurried to her room.

AN HOUR after dawn, the sky a slate gray, with snow-blurs edging up higher above the white mountains, Blade Talbot urged his horse out of town. Behind him Tod Breen slouched in his saddle, his handsome face sullen, his mouth an ugly sneer.

The Tallows lined up before them, a squat, growing raggedness in the blurred white world about them. The warmth of the ground had melted some of the snow in the little valleys, and the bare patches stood out in scattered order, like mud-spots on a white tablecloth. The morning winds had cleared much of the loose topsnow, and the going was sure but slow. Blade reined in once to roll a cigarette, shaping it carefully. He glanced through narrowed eyes at the boy, but Tod remained silent. Blade lighted the cigarette.

"Look, Tod," he said, gently. "Talk's no good. I know that. If you've got to go out on a tear, do it in Buffalo Horn, not in Tall Pine."

Tod's dark eyes went through him without seeing him. His expression didn't change. Blade sighed.

"A man's got to grow up sometime, Tod," he said.

"That's just exactly damned well how I feel!" Tod snarled. "Why can't you mind your own damned business? I wasn't hurtin' you none." His face worked angrily. "Mustn't pack a gun. Mustn't drink. Mustn't go to Pine! What the hell, I'm no kid! I'm past twenty."

"That you are," Blade agreed. "But I'm not going to argue with you, Tod."

"No, you won't argue—never, not with anyone! You take what you want. You order things done the way you want. And if it doesn't work out to suit you, you bust it up and start over again!" He was almost standing in the stirrups, shouting. "I'll do as I please, damn you!" He dug in his spurs, and his horse burst away.

Blade sat still, took a deep drag on the cigarette. He saw the dark figures of Tod and his horse forging away from him, and only after a minute did he urge his own mount forward at a walk.

The Tallows lurched upward as he rode on. He followed the tracks of Tod, and the trail was clear. Sideroads cut off to small farms and ranches, but he did not pause at any of them. As he rode deeper into the broken land of the Tallows there was but the one trail plainly before him. The range broke here, staggering off to the north in jagged sweeping peaks and pinnacles, and the trail to the High Dome range veered to the side. To the left were the snow-softened jumble of rock and gulleys and canyons and passes and staggering cliff-summits that marked the Tallow Brakes. A ruined, desolate land where only a few scattered nesters dared to live, where shebangs and forgotten hideouts clung against canyon walls. Outlaw country—the brakes where hunted men

could never be found. The trail edged the broken land, crept along the smoother going of the mountain shelf-lands, then edged higher, and at Lookout he reined in to breathe his horse, and to stare back at the Red Wall, a sharply-drawn streak of red rock that flung up and northward before him. The blurred lines of Tall Pine were there, and the smudge of black smoke against the slate-gray sky.

It was a savage, broken panorama of wilderness. It stirred something inside him, and held, perhaps, the secret of why he rode into Pine when Horn was closer beyond the Tallows. A thin edge of regret tinged his mind, for through the secret fastness of the Hole-in-the-Wall he had ridden fifteen years ago with Nate Chantelle at his side. His name hadn't been Blade Talbot then. He frowned, tugged at his lower lip. Tod Breen; the boy persisted in coming into his thoughts. How much the wildness in the boy reminded him of himself at the same age. Wild, headstrong—his own acts had driven him West, a hunted man. But here, beyond the Red Wall, in the rugged grandeur of the Tallows he had found himself. If only Tod could do the same—

A sound made him turn around. It was Tod, riding in toward him. The boy was smiling, tense, awkward. He rode slowly, and his horse was breathing easily. He had been waiting for Blade here.

"Blade, I'm sorry for what's happened between us. I'm no good. You ought to see that and throw me out." His face was changed, the sullenness gone. His smile was soft, winning.

It touched something inside Blade, but he made his voice cold. "All right, Tod."

The boy hesitated. "Blade—you—you won't tell Maudie where I've been or what happened?"

"I won't tell her, Tod."

"Thanks, Blade!" The boy's black humor was gone, and he was laughing.

"You ride on ahead," Blade said. "Tell Maudie I'll be in this afternoon. I want to stop by the Ridge cabin and tell Wyatt to come in."

"Sure, Blade!" The boy urged his horse away. He swung about in the saddle to call back, "Thanks again!"

Blade watched him out of sight, angling sharply against the rugged backdrop of the Tallows where the trail dropped sharply down. And still Talbot sat there, his mind busy. He rolled another cigarette, swung back to stare down at the vastness of the Red Wall country. His thoughts were jumbled, confused. The softness inside the boy had come to the fore again, and it worked as always to confuse Blade's hardness toward him. He built it deliberately in his mind, bruising punishment designed to keep him busy, to work off the black moods that beset him—then Tod would speak, laugh with him, and he'd lose the determination and let him off. It was always the same; and he could not force regret into his mind. As if some of the love he knew for Maudie overlapped Tod, and held him, too.

Blade flipped the cigarette away. Then the quiet introspection of the moment was broken by a sound behind him, and Blade swung to one side. A rifle blasted, close at hand, and his hat was ripped from his head. Blade reeled in the saddle, then fell heavily. His mind spun with one thought uppermost: That damned Chinker Kaye—he's found the guts to squeeze the trigger of his Henry! Then there was a solid wall of white rock smashing into his face, and all sound was lost in the repeated roar of the gun as shot after shot sought out the fallen target.

III

CHAYME BAXTER was a bigger man than most, and he liked to think he cut a wider swath. His voice was a loud boom, but not without subtlety of its own. The bluffness of his manner was a carefully tended affectation that screened the real depth of his character. Big men were seldom credited with big brains, but the rule was not true in Chayme's case, and he made every effort to keep it to himself.

At the moment as he topped the swale-back of the Tallows, his heavy brows were knitted together in a frown, and his eyes were deceptively bland. But his mind was busy, digesting the statements of Chinker Kaye who rode beside him. Chinker was a willing tool, more concerned with the hard money he jangled in his denim britches than with his conscience.

"I tell you it's got to be done, Chayme,"

the smaller man went on. His voice was a reedy piping, and he bent forward in the saddle to come that much closer. Chayme sat very erect, his chest standing out from the flatness of his belly, a pose he liked to hold.

"Yeah, sure," he agreed placidly. "Only who's going to do it?"

"What's it worth, Chayme?" Eagerness tripped over the words, and Chayme let his bland blue eyes fix on Chinker's face.

"To me?" he asked, placidly. "Not a damned thing. I don't give a damn whether Blade Talbot dies today or forty years from now. He's nothing to me."

Chinker's face wrinkled up, like a baby's before bursting into tears, but Chinker merely spat a brown stream to one side. His chaw of tobacco made a mound in his right cheek, puffing it out. "That ain't the way I heerd it, Chayme. Seems to me I heard as how you'd like it fine—like mebbe a thousand dollars worth."

Chayme's reply was a laugh, a deep, belly-surging laugh. "Are you serious? I wouldn't pay that bounty for Butch Cassidy's hide, let alone anybody else's."

Chinker spat again. "But maybe five hundred?" he persisted.

"Look, Chinker, I've heard your yarn. You sat up on the ridge and you pegged Blade Talbot in the sights of your Henry. That's fine. I don't give a damn. You didn't shoot him. That's what counts. I don't pay money for talk, and I don't hire killing done. I 'tend to my own troubles." He squinted into the distance. "Now you hearing things about me, Chinker—"

"Hell, don't get touchy. Anybody with any sense knows the rustlers in the Tallows ain't workin' in cahoots with the nesters just for the hell of it. Somebody's paying off. Somebody. I ain't sayin' it's you. I don't give a damn. I done jobs for you before. So I come again. That's all."

Chayme rubbed at his heavy jawline with one thick paw of a hand. His eyes were still wide, clear, but the mind behind them was running swiftly forward, tearing at the rider's words, sifting them to fit patterns of thought. Then he shrugged.

"Think what you like. Don't make sense a rancher would side against his own kind with the nesters. Don't make sense I'd be backin' the play. Crazy talk is just that, Chinker. You'd believe Gusty Boone's tall tales, I reckon."

"It wasn't Gusty talkin'," Chinker went on doggedly. His thin face twisted. "I ain't tryin' to talk out o' turn. None o' my business. I pick up a few bucks here an' there in my own way. Maybe I got some CB's in my time. I ain't fussy—what the hell, you gotta catch me doin' it. But right now they's big things crackin'. Come spring, they's goin' to be things happenin'. I don't want to be left out."

"Knowing you, I don't think you will be, Chinker," Chayme put in. "Just the same, I'm not hirin' you or anybody else to drop Blade Talbot." His voice lost its booming note, dropped slowly lower. "If Blade Talbot was found in the Tallows with a Henry slug in his head—I say if, mind you—it might end a little trouble between Blade and me, and I might be thankful a mite. Just if. That's all."

Chinker's grin crept out, bending his brown-stained lips. "Gotcha." He kept pace a moment longer, then raised a hand. "Gotta be goin', Chayme. Nice seein' you."

"Sure," Baxter answered, heartily, and reined in. He watched the other disappear in the white uplands, and his blue eyes narrowed. "Now I wonder where he heard talk like that?" he mused, then shrugged. It didn't matter. Nobody, not even Blade Talbot, would believe it. And if Chinker Kaye wasn't lying in his teeth, Blade wouldn't be doing much more thinking at all. The thought made Chayme smile.

CHAYME kept his horse to high ground. As the morning advanced, it grew warmer, and he unbuttoned his coat, let it sag away from his wide shoulders. He rode slowly, with some purpose evident. At the Swallow Forks, he turned to the right. The left hand fork would drive straight through the West Tallows to the junction with the Buffalo Horn road. The right moved out of the Tallows, swinging down into the valley below the High Dome. Talbot's land. Chayme smiled, slowly, thoughtfully, and his paw rubbed at his heavy chin again.

Two hours later, Chayme urged his horse up the well-rutted road toward the High Dome ranchhouse set back on a shelving

bench of the dome itself. The entire valley sprawled behind him, backed by the rugged glory of the Tallows, but Chayme had no inclination to stop and admire it. His face settled slowly into a genial smile, and he straightened in the saddle consciously, and settled his Stetson more firmly on his head.

The ranchhouse was of native stone slabs, topped by red tiles, and below it and to one side a matching white-washed stone bunkhouse sprawled. Several riders were sitting in the sunshine before it as he rode past, and he was aware of their glances. He noticed that Gusty Boone came out and followed behind him up the slope toward the house. He reined in before the broad veranda, and swung one leg over the pommel of his saddle. Boone came up, red of face, bowed of leg, with lank black hair streaming over his forehead.

"Howdy, Baxter," the Dome foreman called out. "Must be thinkin' deep, ridin' in without even sayin' howdy."

"Didn't see you, Gusty," Baxter lied blandly. "Some of your Dome riders don't take much to CB or its boss, so I rode on."

"Now I wonder how in the world you ever gained a fool impression like that," Gusty said, guilelessly. "Why I reckon outside o' hatin' the guts of any varmint low enough to work for a buzzard like you, we ain't holdin' nothin' against you a-tall."

Chayme laughed. "A man never knows how to take you, Gusty," he said. "I never did anything to you or the Dome."

Gusty's laugh came immediately. "Reckon as how you ain't—nor won't, Mister Baxter," he said. "An' as for takin' me—like me or lump me, I guess covers it."

The bantam-like stance, the cock of his head, were humorous, but the leanness of his upper body, the deft sureness of his rope-hardened hands were not, and the handle of his Smith and Wesson Model Number Three was well-worn. Seven notches were cut, four on one side, three on the other. When there had been six notches, a ranny in Tall Pine had called Gusty Boone a liar and a cheat. When they buried him the next day, Gusty made a show of filing the seventh notch, and no one had cared to test the mettle of his humor since. Chayme thought of that, and made his laugh boom out again.

"I don't rile easy, Gusty," he said. "You made a boast you was the biggest liar in forty states, and then killed a man for agreeing with you. I ain't tempted either way."

"Ahuh," Gusty drawled. He spat to one side. "Somehow, I didn't think you would be, Chayme."

"Stop it, Gusty!" The voice was low-pitched, but both men came erect. Gusty let a sheepish grin creep over his mouth, and Chayme forgot to smile. His blue eyes were no longer bland when he watched Maudie Sanner.

"Hello, Chayme," she said. She smiled him welcome, and it made a warmth grow inside him, and the swiftness of his mind fought it down. He forced himself to look at her objectively, and even then he liked what he saw far too much. She was tall, slender to the point of thinness, but full-breasted, and wide of shoulder. She was dressed in boys' blue denim britches, and wore a checkered shirt, a costume that revealed more than it concealed. From the open collar of her shirt, her throat swelled upward, smoothly tanned, to the firm line of her chin. Her hair was dark auburn, and her eyes were darkly blue. Her mouth was mobile, swift to laugh; her nose a firm straight line. The darkness of her brows were almost level, lending a formality to her features belied by the brightness of her eyes.

"My name's Maudilene Sanner, in case you haven't seen me before, Chayme," she said, flushing under his steady, level gaze.

"Excuse me for a damned idiot, Maudie," he said, quickly. "Reckon you're like the Dome—a feller can't get used to seeing something like you out here."

"If that's a compliment, Chayme, thank you. But you didn't ride twenty miles this morning to give me a compliment."

"Nope." His smile came back. "I rode over to see Blade."

Her eyes swung away from him, out towards the gaunt harshness of the Tallows. "He isn't here, Chayme. He said he'd be back this afternoon. Will you come in?"

Chayme Baxter shook his head. He glanced down at the stiff figure of Gusty, and laughed. "Guess not. Some other time. But since I'm here—"

He paused, and the girl looked sharply at him. "Since you're here—?"

He shrugged. "I'm a damned idiot again. I was going to ask you to go to the dance up at Virgie Thompson's with me. It's Saturday night. But you'll be going with Tod, I guess?"

A tiny frown poked between her eyes. Then she nodded. "Thank you, Chayme. Yes, Tod's taking me."

"But you'll save me a dance?"

"Certainly."

"That's good enough. I'll see you then. Tell Blade I'll catch him later." Chayme wheeled his horse.

Gusty Boone spat to one side. "Anything you want to talk to me about?"

"Not now, Gusty," Chayme said, slowly. He laughed, and the sound was off-key somehow. "Someday, perhaps, we'll have to talk. But not now."

"Any time, Baxter," Gusty assured him, and turned to watch him ride out of the ranch yard. Then he swung about. "Damn it, Maudie, you ain't showin' good sense encouragin' a feller like Chayme."

"Is that so? Well, Gusty Boone, I'm going to tell Blade you tried to pick a fight with him! How do you like that?"

He wilted instantly. "Aw, Maudie, you wouldn't do that, would you? You know Blade told me to lay off Chayme."

"All right, as long as you stop telling me what to do."

"Sure-enough!" he agreed with a grin. "I'll leave that to Blade Talbot—an' I reckon I'll just put a bug in his ear. You recollect what he did to that ranny last summer that tried to catch you out in the hills alone? Reckon Chayme would be just his size to eat whole."

It was an empty threat and she knew it. But just the same the savagery of Blade's handling of the man that summer had shocked her.

"Gusty, I'm worried about Tod and Blade. Tod's been gone all night too. You know the Tallows when it's snowing. There was enough to drift last night."

"Sure was," the foreman agreed. "But you won't catch either one of 'em out in it 'less'n it's necessary. Reckon after that fight you had with Tod he rode out to tie a can on. Reckon Blade's gone to fetch him in. That ain't goin' to make it any pleasanter around here."

Gusty returned to the bunkhouse, and the girl stood there on the broad porch, staring out at the whitened shape of the mountains. It had been her fault that Tod had ridden off the Dome. To her it was just another of their fights, common since childhood; but to Tod they were growing in importance, changing in meaning. She felt mixed up, somehow, lost in the flurry of her own emotions. The feeling she had for Tod, the feeling she had for Blade—sometimes they seemed warped, twisted. She forced the thought away, and her eyes, staring out over the grim Tallows, were shadowed with worry.

Tod Breen's face was twisted a bit as he rode away from Blade Talbot. He was not aware of the open hypocrisy he had shown, but felt a growing uneasiness coupled with a rising anger. This giving into the older man, forcing a smile he did not mean, playing with the affection of the man who had raised him, was a game he had grown adept at; but by its very nature it forced a tether upon his actions, and a growing rebellion blazed inside him.

"Damn him, anyway!" he hissed between clenched teeth, then came erect, pulling in his horse as the rattle of rifle fire broke the stillness of the mountains. For an instant the crazy thought, spurred by his own guilt-sense, that Blade was shooting at him, struck him; then he realized the shots were behind him, too far away to be directed at him. At the same instant he realized that the target must be Blade. Instinctively he bent to grasp his rifle, and wheeled his horse; then in the middle of the action he paused, reined in. He sat undecided for a moment, his face torn by conflicting emotions. If Blade was in trouble—

"To hell with him!" he cursed, finally. "Let the tall man take care of himself!"

He wheeled his horse back downtrail, and dug in the spurs.

THE snow broke Talbot's fall, and his body was rolling even as he struck. Bullets chewed mud and soft slush, and spat it into his face; but no shots came too close, and a moment later a heavy rock mound was between him and the marksmen. He was breathing heavily. Blood dripped from his scalp down into his face,

and he used his bandanna to wipe it away.

For the space of a full minute he lay close against the rock. The rifle was emptied with deliberate thunder, and twice chips of the bluish rock flew over his head as lead struck close. From where he lay, Blade could see little of the heights above him; he saw his horse, broomtail flying, surging downtrail, and cursed at the loss of his rifle in the boot. Then his hand reached his handgun, and he drew himself up.

Left shoulder pressed against the boulder which sheltered him, he bent forward to peer around it as close to the ground as he could. The mountains loomed sharply up into the blue puddle of the sky, rimmed with white, and scarred by the blue of rock slides, the brown splotches of earth. He held there steadily, and the rifle roared again, and he picked out the spot, some five hundred yards to his left and above him. He had no more than shifted his position to gain better cover from this angle, when a second rifle blared, the lead spattering close beside his head. Rock splinters ripped into his face, and he fell headlong, lay still.

Two of them! A curse framed itself on his lips. Right and left; they had him pinned down with a crossfire. The second rifle was closer; not much over two hundred yards; too far for any accuracy with a handgun. He shook his head, extended his arm straight before him, resting the base of his fist against the rock. The first rifle blasted three times before the closer gun fired. Blade caught the merest shadow of a man's head, and held his own fire. Lying prone, he allowed his body to sag, roll halfway over; but the revolver was ready.

The nearer rifle exploded, and rock flew once more. Blade remained still. The first rifle fired, then a man yelled something that Blade couldn't catch.

"Hell, Chinker, he's done for!" a second voice replied, closer at hand. "I can see his boot. I caught him in the head when he shifted around away from you."

"Make damn' sure!" came the shouted reply.

A man stood up. Blade remained still. His extended arm, the sights of the gun were bearing a trifle to the right of the cautious rifleman. Not yet! he cautioned himself.

The closer rifleman swung up in full sight, his rifle trained on Blade's inert figure. Blade was gambling he wouldn't fire the "make-sure" shot, and he felt his body ache with the desire to lunge away from the barrel of that gun. But he forced himself to lie still. The bushwhacker stepped down, carefully choosing his footing. He kept to the left of Blade's gun, never coming in line. He stumbled, caught himself, and his rifle swung away. Blade sprang up; his revolver barked five times, in a deliberate pattern of fire that framed the other man. It was a border trick that Nate Chantelle had taught him.

"A handgun ain't accurate enough at anything past sixty yards," the gunman had said, his thin face taut. "You can't expect to hit what you're aimin' at. So shoot around it. Allowin' for drift, an' the bullet droppin' some, you're pretty damned sure of hittin' at least twice in five shots—an' a forty-five slug will drop what it hits."

He felt the Smith and Wesson buck in his hand. The rifleman threw both hands over his head. The rifle clattered down the rocks and the man pitched backward gaining momentum as he fell down the rock.

The other man yelled something, and his rifle blasted but Blade's movement had carried him out of sight. He bent forward, ran swiftly, boots digging into slushy snow and dirt. He hit the talus slide at a run, fell behind a protruding rock as the second rifleman opened up again. Bullets whined into empty space. Blade caught the closer rifleman's gun, cradled it in his arms. He slipped into a sharp-sided crevice, braced his back, and began the awkward climb.

The crevice ran almost vertically up the face of the cliff, but by using his back and legs as an arch, he went up. His coat caught twice, and only desperate lunges kept him going. Then his head topped the rise, and he fell prone over the edge, digging in with his free hand to slide out of the crevice.

Some three hundred yards to his left he saw a man bent forward, peering down. He was breathing hard, and his effort made his hands shake. He chanced a shot, missed, but saw the other dive frantically to one side.

"All right, Chinker!" Blade yelled. "You had your chance—now it's my turn!"

A muffled curse was his reply. Rocks slid

down, marking the man's flight, and he fired three times in that direction. Chinker Kaye yelled in fear—then hoofs pounded, and Blade relaxed against the rock, breathing hard.

He waited a few minutes before he returned to the road. He paused at the fallen man, knelt to identify him. He knew him as Joe Green, who ran with Kaye, and was a hanger-on with known rustlers. He was dead, three shots having caught him in the middle body. Blade nodded, slowly, his gaunt face hardening.

"Now it begins," he whispered, gently, with something akin to regret in his voice.

Then the drum of hoofs made him tense, and he swung around quickly, the gun coming up in his hands.

"Howdy, Blade," a voice drawled, and Nate Chantelle rode up, bringing Blade's runaway horse by the reins.

IV

AGAIN Blade was surprised by the odd intentness of this man he called his friend. Even the number of years that lay behind them did not allay the renewed shock of the outlaw's vitality; nor did the gray at his temples, and the heavy lines on his sun-dark face soften it. He lounged in the saddle, his pale eyes unreadable, his mouth smiling with genuine concern.

"Pinned you down, huh? I heard the shots down below. When I heard your repeater cracking I figgered the time for hurry was past. Your pony was idling along toward the Dome. I brought him back." It was a longish speech for Chantelle, and Blade nodded his thanks.

"Joe Green caught it," he said, tersely. "Chinker got away. He'll be hard to find for awhile."

"Ahuh. Seems funny them running in pairs. Chinker didn't have the guts to try it alone, I guess. But Joe's always been the one to see the color of money."

In so many words, Nate was saying the two had been hired for the job. "Can't figure it that way, Nate," Blade said. "Not that it isn't as good as any other way. Only I never heard there was a bounty for my pelt."

"Either way, Joe won't cash in on it." Chantelle shrugged expressively. "I didn't think it had gone this far—yet."

"Yet?"

"You think something different?"

Blade's frown deepened. "There's always talk in the Tallows. Always will be. I haven't been shot at in ten years."

"Until today." Nate grimaced. "I always said you were a hard nut to crack."

"You ought to know, Nate. You taught me."

"Damned if I didn't!" Nate's grin came suddenly. "Be funny if I taught you the trick that kills me."

"No chance, Nate." Blade spoke solemnly. "It will never come to that."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am."

Chantelle nodded slowly. "Glad to hear it anyway, pard. But supposin'— just supposin'—I was to run off half the Dome's herd this Spring?"

"You won't, Nate, so it's only so much air. Means nothing."

"Nope, reckon I won't. But supposin' I did? You still feelin' the same way when the wolf-cub you're raisin' takes off your hand up to the elbow?"

"Still talking about yourself, Nate?"

Blandly Nate smiled. "Of course. Who else?"

"There's been wild talk about Tod."

"Just talk."

"I hope so."

"That means you're not sure." Nate blinked. "All kids are wild for awhile. Give him a chance to grow into his britches."

"Sure. I mean to."

The outlaw stirred. "I mean it, Blade. What if I turned on you? I've been given some ideas lately."

"You, too? Trouble walks in long strides once it's started. Nate, you can run off every damn cow on the Dome. And if you need some help getting them through the Tallows, I'm your man. I've told you before half of everything I own is yours. If you want it all, that's okay, too."

"Talkin' like a drunken Blackfoot dog soldier," Nate said. But his voice was wry, and his face went solemn. "I guess we know each other, Blade. I made you a promise once that I wouldn't buck you. I won't, di-

rectly—but things are shaping up where it might happen. I'd be against those you're with. What then?" He spoke almost to himself.

"I can't tell another man how to live his life, Nate. I give your promise back to you. If it happens—it happens. You know your chances. But—" Blade stopped, gestured with one hand. "It's still waiting for you, Nate. The Dome, the best range in the Territory. You're too damned old to ride the Owlhoot Trail any more. Settle down and start skimming the cream. You've got it coming."

"You make a man dream crazy dreams when you talk like that, Blade. Stop it or I'll hate your guts. I had my chance to start from scratch with you. I didn't take it. I'm not going to cut in on your string now. There may still be a chance I can get there beside you my own way."

"Not that way, Nate. You know better. Who's talking Siwash now?"

"Just the same," Chantelle said stubbornly, "that's the way it's got to be."

"All right, Nate. You can't see the handwriting on the wall, or you won't. But if trouble comes I'd hate like hell to find you at the bottom of it. I'm staying out of it. I won't go in unless I'm forced into it. But if I do it's got to be all the way. No exceptions, Nate."

"No exceptions." The small outlaw placed his hand against his throat. Then he laughed. "I always had a hunch I'd live to be hung. It's still holding good."

Talbot nodded. "Nate, you weren't out here for the ride."

The outlaw's grin came back. "Hell no. I rode out to talk to you, to warn you there's been talk." He chuckled. "I was too damned late. But then I didn't figger it to happen today—nor here. Reckon Chinker got overanxious."

"Who's paying him, Nate?"

The outlaw shrugged. "I don't know. Not Brant. I'm sure of that. Who else is there?" He held up one hand. "Virgie Thompson's been talkin' mean about how it's time a stop was put to the nesters and the rustlin' along with 'em. You don't have to guess who's ridin' point for the ranchers. It's Virgie, an' he's not pullin' leather a-tall."

"And looking the other way?"

"Brant's got a stake. So have I. Chinker's one of forty owlhooters I know in Tall Pine. They all got a stake. If Virgie raises too much hell, they'll either lay low or they'll fight. With the nesters gettin' what they get sidin' them, the odds are they'll fight. Men like Jason Cambridge, Mel Freer, Art Polven—they want nothin' but to be let alone with their own grubbin'. There's maybe five hundred nester families in the Red Wall. From the Wall to the West Tallows they got their quarter-sections. I even heard they was a family movin' in close to the Dome. You see how it goes?"

"I see." Blade frowned. "I didn't know they had swung around the Tallows yet. I heard some had gone into the Brakes. That was expected. They can make a go of it there. Cattle drift down there. The draws haven't been cleaned out in eight years. An' men like Chinker hole up there, drift through towards Aimee Junction, and take with 'em what cattle they steal. It's been the same for ten years."

"Not the same." Nate corrected. "It's growin', Blade. Men in the brakes will grow rich in another ten years. It ain't penny-ante no more."

"That's a hunch for me?"

"Take it if you read the signs that way." Chantelle shrugged. "We've said what I rode out to say."

"Maudie was asking for you the other day, Nate. When will you ride into the Dome again?"

The nervous grin faded and Chantelle frowned, looked sharply away. "I don't know, Blade. I don't know."

"Remember, Nate, it's never too late if a man tries hard enough."

The outlaw's bitter laugh rang out. "I wish I could believe that!" He waved a hand. "Take care of yourself, Blade. I'll send somebody out from Pine to bury Joe there. Maybe his death will slow things down. But don't count on it."

HE RODE back up the trail toward Lookout. Talbot rode on once more. His head ached where Chinker's bullet had ripped close to the scalp. But the bleeding had stopped. He dabbed at his cheek with his bandanna. It had been too close for comfort. And yet he felt a thin edge of

exuberance, a tingling inside him he could not name nor control. Excitement had always meant something special to him, but he had fought against the desire to indulge it. And he had always won the fight. Until today, it had been years since he had felt the old wildness stirring inside him. And now the challenge, the danger of his position, the knowledge he had bucked someone hard enough for them to try to kill him, threatened to renew it past the point of control. The thought gave him a queer sense of satisfaction coupled with the knowledge it was dangerous to let himself go too far.

Where the Tallows broke into the scattered round-topped mesas before the sudden drop to the valley floor, he reined in. A thinnish gray haze held over the valley floor, and the High Dome shot up incredibly before him, a blue-rock mound like nothing else in the West. Topped by the Lost Forest, rent by staggering lines of talus and rock falls, it thrust up sheerly more than two thousand feet, standing abreast the mighty Tallows themselves, but independent, not linked to them by ridge or swaleback. It was an unique rock formation, called the Devil's Hat by some, and figured largely in the Blackfoot legends. To Talbot's knowledge, no man, white or red, had ever scaled the rugged Dome to the forest-crowned top. It had long been his dream to try it, to build on the summit a cabin from which the whole world could be seen; but a man's work allowed him only to dream, never to realize those dreams.

Below the bulky lower shoulder of the Dome lay the Talbot ranch. And the whole valley beyond was his. Fifty thousand acres of the finest grazing land any man had ever owned. He felt a lifting, a carrying away of his troubles when he viewed it so, and realized that it belonged to him, and to Tod Breen and Maudie Sanner when he was gone. He frowned as he rolled a cigarette. Fifteen years ago this coming Summer he had ridden through the Hole-in-the Wall, into the Red Wall country, and beside him had ridden Nate Chantelle.

The burning cabin had smeared the sky with black smudge, and they had ridden past the three bodies in the yard, a man and two women. The story was plain. The Cheyennes had jumped the cabin sometime after dawn. The fight had been brief and bitter; the Indians had looted the place. It had been a small raiding party, and one of the last in that part of the Territory, but deadly nonetheless.

As they had finished burying the three victims, Blade had caught a muffled sound, and tracing it, came to a padlocked cellar-door behind the house. They had broken the lock. Two frightened children stared up at them, a boy of five and a girl a year or two older. The girl had held an ancient Sharps rifle in her arms, and she pulled the trigger when the doors swung back. The shot had torn a hole in the sky, and the rifle-butt had thrown her backwards, but no harm had been done.

Blade closed his eyes. Had that been the factor needed to change his longing to settle down into the concrete fact of accomplishment? He had had no obligation to the two youngsters, and yet he had assumed it. Apart from their names, they had no inheritance, and the bleakness of the ranch made it only too evident of the impractical judgment of the dead owners. A piece of a letter had given him the information that the boy's father had died earlier that summer; his mother was staying with the Sanners until she could arrange means of traveling back to where she had come from. Where this was, Blade never discovered.

He shook his head, the poignant nearness of the memories sharpening them for him. He had built the first house on the Dome with his own hands; he had paid his last hundred dollars for the beginning of the herd that now numbered three thousand head. And he had never regretted his decision.

WHEN he left the foothills of the Tallows, he followed a rutted road to the left, that swung sharply away from the Valley of the Dome. He rode slowly, marking the swift melting of the snow that had fallen the night before. Only up the higher slopes where it lay in deep drifts, did any remain. But the first swift storm of the winter had struck, and would be repeated. For the first time he almost welcomed the advent of the harsh season, for it marked the beginning of a time of waiting. Nothing

would happen, nothing could come to a head, when the white snow covered the mountains. And in that period of time he could think his way clear, perhaps come up with an answer that would satisfy himself, if not others.

An hour later as he let his mount pick its own way down a canyon depth, he reined in and bent forward across the saddlehorn. Fresh wheel tracks were cut deeply into the soft loam of the canyon bed. He knew of no wagons heading this way in a month. His face puzzled a frown, and he turned to stare back at the forbidding heights of the Tallows before riding on. He followed the recent tracks, and his puzzlement grew. The off hind wheel was loose on the axle, making a wobbly track; and the team seemed to be the odd coupling of a cow and a horse.

The canyon ended abruptly on a shelving benchland west of the Dome; a grim, forbidding area of rockslides and high winds. Snow was drifted against the rocks, still unmelted despite the growing warmth of the afternoon sun. A bit of bright color caught his eye, and he saw a red rag on a greasewood clump. He reined aside, bent forward to pick it off, and studied it for a moment, his eyes narrowing. Gaudy cotton material, cheap and sunfaded. He looked forward, and caught the slim column of smoke standing up in a spreading arc against the sky. He urged the horse forward at a walk, lounging in the saddle.

The off-wheel had parted company with the wagon, and the vehicle seemed to be lurching crazily, the battered canvas top swaying dangerously off to the right. The campfire was small, and the woman straightening beside it to stare at him with lackluster eyes was big-framed, broad of shoulder and hip. Her face was masked by her sunbonnet, but her hands were large and work reddened. A single swaybacked horse grazed the meager brush to one side, and a red-hided cow switched her tail beside it. The animals were both gaunt, ribs standing out. The cow's udder was dangling emptily.

A man came up, rolling the loose wheel before him. He saw Blade, stiffened, and let go the wheel. It rolled forward, pivoted in arcing circles, fell with a thud. Blade stopped his horse, swung a leg up. The man looked toward the woman, then back to him. He seemed uneasy, not sure of himself, but his rawboned face was hard, and the set to his jaw was determined.

"Howdy, friend," Blade said. "Having trouble?"

The man spat to the ground. "Threw a dang wheel. Bent the dang axle." There was a resigned weariness in his voice.

"Too bad. Going far?"

The man seemed to tense. His face went sullen. "Maybe," he said. "Make any difference if I wasn't?"

Blade ignored the demand. "You ever hear of the High Dome Ranch?"

"You mean Talbot's spread?" The man spat again. "Shore, I heerd o' it. Ain't heerd nothin' else since I left Tall Pine. Every damn' feller we meet says, don't go on Dome land. Talbot's crazy mean. He's hung fellers."

Blade caught a movement behind the wagon and two youngsters came out. A boy and a girl, about six and seven. The girl was carrying a baby. A toddler dragged behind the boy. They lined up and stared at him. The woman moved over to stand beside them.

"This is Dome land," Blade said, aware of a tightness inside him. The woman had been boiling grits. No meat, just the hominy meal.

"I reckoned that," the man said, stubbornly. He moved his feet. "I ain't doin' nothin' wrong, mister. But it's a shore bet that Talbot don't hold no patent for all this land. It's government land free for homesteadin'."

"So I've heard. But aren't you pretty far from Pine to look for land?"

"Ain't so far. Best places are gone the other side o' the Tallows. Me, I'm strikin' out where I got some choosin'."

"Done any yet?"

The nester shifted his feet, hawked and spat. "Reckon," he answered. "They's water down here a piece. I got my eye on it there."

"Going to fence it?"

The nester grunted. "With what? I ain't got nothin'. But a man's got to make a beginnin' somewheres. We come eight hundred mile already. We cain't turn back, 'though the Lord knows we ain't got much to go on. But with a piece of land of his own, a man can make a start."

Blade saw the patched cover of the wagon, the worn animals, the strain in the faces of the children, the woman's worn figure, the worried lines in the man's face. He nodded soberly.

"My name's Blade Talbot," he said. The other didn't seem to be surprised. He straightened a bit more, glanced again at his wife. That was all.

"I ain't askin' for trouble, Mister Talbot," he said. "Reckon I ain't got nothin' to fight with. I'll move on—hell, I'm licked afore I start. But come Spring there'll be others. Plenty more "

"I didn't say anything," Blade put in, slowly, and was surprised at his own words. "You said it was free land. It's open range. If you fence water, my cattle will die. You see that?"

The nester swallowed with an effort.

Blade stared at the children once more. "This is no good for you. You'll never have enough water to farm this land."

The hope in the other's eyes died a-borning. He nodded again.

Blade started to ride on, rode past the fire. He felt eyes on his back. Then he stopped the horse, swung it around. He rode back to the man. He was still standing, staring down at the fallen wheel.

"Mister," he said, slowly, "there's a line cabin down here about five miles. There's a man there named Jack Wyatt. He's working for the Dome. He'll come back with you with tools to put that wheel on. If you go on down the ridge, it's easy going, and you can reach West Fork. You'll spot the white rockslide. There's a valley just beyond there. Water, grass and sweet soil. There's an old trapper's cabin in there, pretty far gone, but the sod roof's still up. You can winter there and make up your mind what piece of land you want to try your luck on. There are fifteen sections of land deeded to the Dome. You're free to pick over the rest. If you need anything else ride into the Dome. I'll be there."

He didn't wait for thanks, but rode on. Behind him the man slowly walked over to the woman and laid his arm across her shoulders. She was crying.

The line cabin was a weathered gray square, and Jack Wyatt came out as Blade rode up. He was no longer young. A leathery face wrinkled unexpectedly as he smiled. He held up a hand.

"Howdy, boss!" he called out. "Hell, I weren't expectin' you for a coon's age. Thet snow flurry hit the Dome?"

"I wasn't at the Dome," Blade answered, shortly. "But it hit there all right. Your grub about played out?"

"Not quite. I ain't no hog. Got some bacon an' flour left, some canned goods, some sugar. I kin hold on fer another month."

"No need to," Blade said. "Pull back to the ranch." He stopped, uneasy before the other's stare. "And, Jack—there's a fellow riding in pretty soon. His wagon threw a wheel. Help him out, then ride into the Dome. No use packin' what grub you got left. Give it to him. He can use it. You might drop a three-year old, and let him dress it."

Wyatt blinked, rubbed at his face, then nodded. "Shore, boss, whatever you say. But ain't thet bein' purty friendly?"

Blade ignored the question. "Been quiet?"

"Yep, purty peaceful." Wyatt grunted. "But thet don't mean nothin'. About a week ago I cut track east o' here. Headin' for the brakes. About forty head. Some nester is goin' to have it fat an' easy this winter."

"Sure it was a nester?"

"Nope. Just guessin'." Wyatt grinned. "Saw Chinker Kaye over on the ridge the some mornin'. Maybe it ties in?"

"Maybe." Blade shrugged. "What else."

"Nothin'. The cattle been driftin' south, but I think I've kept most of 'em turned. Come deep snow, they'll move back into the valley. Some get into the brakes, but not too many. The feller thet cleans out the brakes is goin' to have a handsome herd on his hands. Virgie Thompson's always talkin' about doin' it. Just talkin', I s'pose."

LONG shadows were ranging out into the valley when Blade rode on. He looked back into the dark slopes of the mountains, and saw a tiny red eye blinking out. He thought of the nester family, and his face set. He shook his head slowly. "It's a big land, big enough for all of 'em," he said, and it sounded even to himself as if he were apologizing for his own actions toward them. He laughed then, and the sound of it

was good.

As it darkened, the tree-topped heights of the Dome were the only lighted objects in the valley. The striata were shadowed, like questing fingers probing the sharp belly-lines of the Dome. Gigantic, brooding, it hung over the mountain valley, a lone sentinel, marking the eternal life of the mountains. Then, slowly, as if a curtain were descending before it, the light failed, and the Dome receded into the nothingness of black night.

The wind was cold, and the stars were winter bright when Blade caught first the aroma of pine smoke in the air, then saw the yellow twinkle of the lights of the High Dome. His tired horse pricked up its ears, and the walk quickened to a trot with the home-smell in its nostrils. He rode past the wooden corral bars of the lower pasture. Horses neighed, rubbed close against the bars. His own mount whinnied sharply, and a rectangle of yellow light appeared as a door opened. Then a man's figure was outlined, a bowlegged, bantam figure with an upright shock of hair.

Gusty Boone's voice yelled out: "That you, Blade?"

"Me, Gusty," Blade answered. He reined in, swung down. Gusty Boone came out of the bunkhouse. Windows were yellow squares in black nothingness. The ranchyard was black velvet. The gaunt, faint outlines of corrals and buildings stood out.

"Get somebody to take care of my horse," Blade said. He turned towards the main house, then paused. "Did Tod get back?"

"Shore's hell did," Gusty answered. "An' boss, Chayme Baxter was here this afternoon."

"What did he want?"

"Said he wanted to see you. Didn't say much more." Belligerency crept into Gusty's voice. "Damned if thet ranny don't rub me the wrong way, Blade."

"You had a run-in with him?"

"Almost. Miss Maudie shut me up." The cowboy's grin was evident. Then it faded, and his voice went serious. "I think Chayme's got it soft over Maudie. She ought to tell the damned galoot where to ride."

"That's Maudie's business, Gusty. We can't run her life."

"Nope, reckon we cain't," the bantam foreman returned. "But shore's hell's hot, I can discourage him permanent if it's necessary."

"Don't try it, Gusty," Blade warned. "Maudie'd have your hide."

"Maybe so but it ain't doin' no good beatin' the dog after he's et the wolf." Gusty grunted. "Hell, Blade, I ain't mindin' yore business for you. But Chayme's lowdown mean. Ain't nobody ever rode for him but knows it."

"The CB hasn't bothered us," Blade reminded him. "Plenty of time when they do."

"I ain't so shore. Sometimes a man gets all riled up after the barn's done burned to the ground. An' besides, there's other things —" Gusty stopped. "Hell, I'm puttin' my foot where my mouth ought to be. You've heard the same talk I have. But it's gettin' more than talk. Baxter shipped seven hundred head this fall. That's a lot of beef. 'Pears like he's still got all the cows he started out with. Funny thing. That made fifteen hundred head he's shipped this year. An' his herd's growin' bigger. Don't make sense. The Dome ain't shipped more'n four hundred head in five years."

Blade nodded. "I know, Gusty," he said, resignedly. It was an old tale, and one he'd heard from more than one source. "I've heard the same thing about Virgie Thompson. There ain't a rancher alive who hasn't laid a brand on a dogie he knew damned well wasn't dropped by one of his cows."

"Have it your way." Gusty walked beside him as he headed for the house. "But I don't mind tellin' you I don't savvy the play. We've lost two hundred head this year. They didn't evaporate. They didn't climb up on the Dome. But they're shore's hell gone. Some of 'em drift down into the brakes; maybe some of 'em are driven. But that ain't a drop in the bucket. An' you know it. But things is shapin' up to a showdown, an' you're just sittin' tight. It ain't reasonable, Blade, an' shore as hell ain't like you. They's a nester moved in east of the Dome—"

"I know it, Gusty," Blade returned. "I saw Jack Wyatt this afternoon. We lost forty head in a bunch, driven south over the ridge into the brakes. And I passed a nester family moving in West of us."

"Jumpin' longhorns, boss!" Gusty's voice rose piercingly. "You're bein' pinched from

every side, an' you're just takin' it without givin' back. What the hell's the matter? What are you waiting for?"

"If you really want to know the truth, Gusty, I frankly haven't the faintest damned notion. But I know one thing. The Dome hasn't been hurt yet. I don't think it will be. But if it is—" He stopped, and his smile came, slowly. "You live on trouble, Gusty—and I'll see that you get a bellyful of it. Meantime, I been thinking about something. Did you ever think about the advantages of turning into a rustler?"

For the first time since he had known him, Blade Talbot found Gusty Boone without a ready reply.

"Are you serious, boss?" the foreman demanded, finally.

They were between the ranchhouse and the bunkhouse, and alone. Blade made sure of that before speaking. He rolled a cigarette between his fingers, placed it in his mouth, lighted it. In the glow he studied Gusty's sun-red face.

"I was never more serious in my life, Gusty," he answered, shortly.

The Dome foreman grunted. "I will be damned!" he ejaculated. "Just who's cows am I s'posed to steal, Blade?"

"Mine," answered Blade. "You'll start by running off a hundred head of Dome cows. If that won't give you a start in the business there ain't nothing that will! But first we're going to stage a little set-to that won't be forgotten in one hell of a hurry. You can start pickin' your spots, Gusty, because the first thing you're going to do is beat the livin' hell right out of me!"

V

MAUDILENE SANNER'S sun-browned hands worked deftly at the rawhide rope she was plaiting. She gave the present braid a savage jerk, and her face was set in an expression of rebellious anger. It was Tod's demeanor that had angered her, and as she thought of him, her hands tightened on the loose ends of the leather rope.

"I ought to use it on him, the darned shorthorn!" she said, savagely, then relented, and a grin moved her mobile lips. A thin dusting of freckles saddled her nose, and the open-throated checkered shirt set off her natural coloring. Her small feet, encased in Diamond boots, tapped the floor agitatedly, then stilled as she heard a horse strike into the High Dome ranchyard. Her expression altered, her eyes closed, slowly, and a flush mantled her cheek. She caught herself holding her breath, and forced the tension away.

It was some minutes before she heard Blade's step on the broad veranda, and the click of the doorknob turning. She was bent over the rope as he came in, and didn't look up. He crossed the room quietly behind her, then suddenly swept forward, and engulfed her in his big arms, lifting her from her chair. She squealed once, and then stilled the sound, and forced herself to go lax in his arms.

"Hello, mountain girl," Blade whispered in her ear.

"Blade Talbot, you big boob, let me go! I'm not ten years old, you know!"

Reluctantly his arms freed her, and his face was confused. "Guess I forgot, *Miss* Sanner," he said. "Sometimes—"

"Sometimes you wish I hadn't grown up!" she completed the thought for him. Oddly, it made a more distinct anger inside her. "And sometimes I think you never did!"

He moved towards the flagstone hearth where a fire rumbled in contented red glory. "Reckon not, Princess," he said, slowly. He rubbed a hand across his eyes. She saw the weariness in his face, a darkness around his usually bright eyes, a thin line of hardness across his mouth. She recognized the signs of trouble in him, and worry pinched at her mind. For a moment she saw him objectively, the flat hardness of his shoulders and chest, the grim strength of his hands. His face was ageless, but tiny puffs of silver were at his temples, and a single strand of white striped the darkness of his hair. He stood, back to the fire, hands behind him as if to gather the warmth.

"What's wrong, Blade?" she asked.

"I'd be lying if I said nothing," he returned. "But it isn't anything we can't handle."

"Tod again?"

"Only partly," he answered. "Give the boy a chance, Maudie. He's still got growing pains."

"How many chances does a man get, Blade?"

"Never enough, it seems."

"Never enough for a man like Tod, anyway," she answered. "I'm not blind, Blade. I can see what he's doing to you. He rode in this morning. Crazy mad. Wouldn't even speak. Slept until afternoon, then rode out towards Buffalo Horn."

"I've told him he could do his funnin' in Buffalo. Nothing wrong in that, Maudie. You two aren't married yet. Tod will step into the harness in time."

"It's all settled, isn't it, Blade?" Her face was quizzical. She bent, slipped a bone twister through the loose strands of her rawhide rope, coiled what she had finished, put it away. "You've always wanted it that way, but supposing it doesn't work out?"

Surprise marked his face. "Hey, what is this, Princess? You two kids have a fight?"

"No more so than usual," she returned. "But you've got to understand something, Blade: It isn't up to you to decide. You can't play God. It's up to Tod and me."

"Have I ever had it any other way, Maudie?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. It wouldn't be like you to force your own way deliberately. It's just that you make it so damned hard for anyone to go against you! Just the same, has it ever occurred to you it might not work out—Tod and me, I mean?"

He shook his head. "It never did, Princess. Are you telling me there's some other boy?"

"Not a boy, Blade. Maybe a man."

"If some rider has been honeying up to you—" He broke off the words abruptly.

Her eyes were as dark as the sage that strewed the hills. Something of the same dark wildness was in them. She smiled.

" 'Some rider,' Blade?" she repeated. "Not some. Every rider between here and Montana Territory who isn't making calf's eyes at Beth Thompson is making them at me. Sometimes I think you're blind, Blade! Why even Gusty Boone—"

"Gusty!"

"Yes, your precious Gusty isn't above doing a bit of flirting with me, either. At the last dance he pinned me in a corner. I had to buy my way past him with a kiss."

"Gusty!" Blade shook his head. "I will be damned." He stared at the girl, and the realization that she was a woman, a desirable woman, struck at him. The fullness of her bosom, the strength of her long legs the clinging denims revealed. He shook his head.

"But it isn't Gusty," she said, sharply. "Sometimes I wish it was. With one word that lank-haired galoot would pack me off quicker'n a wink; and not even Blade Talbot, the tall man himself, could stop him!"

"You beat me, Maudie," he said, finally. "Hands down, I'm beat. But if it isn't Tod, who is it?"

As suddenly as the anger had come, it deserted her. She smiled, and the smile was strong. "Have you ever thought that it might be—you?"

"Me?" For a moment he stared at her, then he broke into a laugh. "You're joking!"

For a moment she stood very still before him, her sage-gray eyes searching his, then she smiled and nodded. "Of course I am, Blade." She stood there for a moment longer. "But perhaps I won't always be joking. It's something to think about."

"You think I haven't thought about it?" Blade relaxed. "Maudie, there's nothing that means any more to me than you and Tod. I've wanted it like that since the day I found you. I'd hate to think of anything coming between you two."

She turned and moved slowly away from him. "It would hurt you too much, Blade, so we can't let it happen, I guess." There was an oddness to her voice that he was aware of, and he read something in her eyes in that final instant they faced each other, that stirred him strangely. Then she was gone, back to the kitchen, and he shook his head.

"You must be starved," she called back to him. "There's hot coffee and food for you on the stove. I'm going to bed."

A very disturbed and puzzled man ate his dinner in silence. Only once he shook his head and muttered: "I will be double damned!" But the comment carried no significance, even to him, and slowly the real problems of the range took his thoughts away from the unusual scene with the girl.

TOD BREEN spent a rugged three hours negotiating the twisting turns of the canyon depths of the Tallows Brakes. He rode easily in the saddle, his face still sullen,

a livid red patch marking his jaw where Blade Talbot's fist had struck. He rubbed it again and again, and each time with a muffled curse.

Twice he reined in, staring about to orient himself before riding on. The brakes were a series of gigantic slashes in the heart of the range, and tumbled one upon another in crazy patterns. But the route he followed was not a new one to him, and he rode on each time with some certainty.

Shadows filled the canyons as he rounded a final sharp twist of rock and urged his horse onto the flat level grassland beyond. The valley was sealed in by high, sharp-cut walls of red rock, with striations of yellow and blue. In the middle distance a cabin set amid a grove of cottonwoods sent white smoke into the sky. Beyond it a large herd milled in widening circles, grazing. Behind the cabin a log-railed corral held a dozen horses, and their heads came up as he cantered across the long, thick winter grass of the canyon depths. As he approached the cabin, a man stepped out on the porch, shielded his eyes with one hand, then waved as he recognized the oncoming rider.

Tod rode up to the cabin and dismounted. He pitched his hat back from his handsome features, and glared at Chinker Kaye's wide grin.

"Hi, Toddy," the rustler greeted him. "Comin' home to roost with the rest o' us wild rannies?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," the boy bleated. "Damn it, Chinker, I thought we had a deal working? I haven't seen any hard money in two weeks."

"Is that so?" Chinker's reedy voice piped clearly. "Hell, Toddy, there ain't been nothin' up in two weeks."

"Yeah?" Breen's eyes were narrowed. "That ain't the way I got it. I know for a fact you drove forty head over the ridge this week."

Chinker's grin didn't fade when he was caught in the lie, he merely shrugged. "So what? I'm not dishin' out any more than I have to."

"I want my cut or there won't be any more. Get that?"

"Shore, I get it. Why get riled up? I was just funnin'. Hell, we got a sweet cookie to munch on. Why throw it away? You've made two thousand dollars this year. Don't be a damned hog."

"We had an agreement and you're goin' to live up to it."

"Why shore I am! But before you get too damned hot under the collar, kid, just remember both ends of the poker are hot. It wouldn't set too well with Talbot if he knew his fair-haired kid was stealin' him blind. I got troubles of my own, not to bother with cheatin' you out o' your two-bits."

The boy sagged slowly against a porch upright. His face was moody, almost desperate. "Damn your heart, you wouldn't dare talk. I wouldn't get hung in any case."

"Don't count on it." Chinker's grin vanished. "But I'll just let you in on it for good: Nothing you can tell Blade Talbot will make him look for me any harder than he is right now!"

It came as a shock to the younger man. His face twisted, then suddenly a wise look came into his eyes. "That shooting—you tried for Blade!"

"I shore as hell did! And a fat lot of good it did me!" Chinker spat. "Joe Green pinned him down. I tried to close in. Then he played possum and caught Joe. I tried to hit him but he got in the rocks above me. I was lucky to get out in one piece. That ranny can shoot!"

"That was a crazy play!" Tod groaned.

"Was it? I'm not so damned shore." Chinker's evil grin widened. "Think about it, Toddy. With Blade out of the way the Dome would be yours. The whole damned thing."

Avarice marked the youth's face. He nodded slowly, then hesitated. "Wait a minute! You weren't tackling Blade Talbot on my account, that's damned sure! What was in it for you?"

"Me?" Chinker looked quickly away.

"I get it. Somebody was paying off but now you won't collect."

The outlaw grimaced. "Figgered it, huh? Reckon it ain't hard. But don't let it give you no ideas. The game ain't played out yet. I'll get Blade Talbot and I'll get him good. And when I do you're goin' to have a partner, kid."

"A partner!" Tod straightened. "Stop kiddin'!"

The rustler moved close, and his fist

closed on the boy's shirt. His free hand swept up, rapped against the smooth cheek. He struck again, hard, vicious blows, and the boy's knees buckled, and he would have fallen except for the hand holding his shirt.

"I don't like the way you talk, Toddy," Chinker said. "I don't like it at all. You ain't runnin' this show. I am! Maybe you can bend Blade Talbot any way you want to but that ain't meanin' you can make me jump through hoops. It's just the other way around. Stick with me and you'll own the Dome and that purty young kid along with it. Buck against me, an' Blade ain't the only one that'll be dropped. You savvy that?"

He released his hold. Tod fell back. He caught his footing. His face was dark-mottled, twisted.

"Damn you, Chinker!"

"Go ahead an' cuss me all you want to but do it someplace else." The outlaw half-turned away. "I ain't unloaded the last batch of cows yet. When I do I'll let you know. Meantime, here's something for your trouble. Have a drink on me." Something golden glinted in the hard winter sunlight, fell at Tod's feet. Tod bent, picked up the twenty-dollar gold piece. He stuffed it into his pocket.

"You're ridin' high, Chinker. Too damned high!"

"Maybe—why don't you try trippin' me up, Toddy boy?"

Angrily, the youth swung up into his saddle, put his horse into a run back the way he came. Chinker Kaye stood on the porch and watched him go.

THE door opened behind him. Chayme Baxter came out. He squinted at the receding figure of Tod Breen.

"Was that smart, Chinker?" he asked. "Rawhiding that kid ain't going to get you nowhere. Not that it's any of my business, but if you're tagging along with me, I ought to know about these things. How long's Tod been hooked up with you?"

Chinker shrugged. "About a year, more or less. Late last year me an' Joe Green was breakin' a Dome brand into a Tall Hat, figgerin' on drivin' straight into Buffalo Horn an' pickin' up some easy cash. We'd done it afore, cuttin' West, drivin' into town as if we was ridin' in from the Hat spread over in the Grays. The kid jumped us, an' for a minute I got a scare; then I sized him up, but good, an' it's been payin' off. Talbot don't keep nothin' from junior there, an' so we pick an' choose. It's been sweet." He shrugged again. "But I reckon I spilled the kettle when I jumped Blade."

"Yeah." Chayme tugged at his lower lip, his eyes thoughtful. "But just the same, maybe you've got something there."

"Shore as hell have, if Talbot's knocked off. There'll be another time."

"Sure there will," Chayme said. "But I didn't ride in here to talk about that. Did you mean what you said this mornin' about maybe coming to me for a payoff? I don't mean about Talbot."

Chinker Kaye turned to face the other. His grin slid quickly into place. "You name it," he said. "I been diggin' around the edges long enough. I'd like to start heavin' pay-dirt. An' from what I hear—"

"What do you hear, Chinker?"

The outlaw winked. "Plenty. I'll say this, I got it from a source that ain't available to Virgie Thompson or maybe Blade Talbot. The ranchers are gettin' the bit in their teeth, only what they're goin' to ride into in the Tallows is goin' to knock 'em loose again."

"If that's enough to give you a hunch, fair enough. But there's more to it. You have to stand back and look at it, Chinker. Most men can't turn that little trick. I don't think you can but I'm going to sketch it in for you. First off, Wyoming Territory is going to be a state this year. The legislature is already meeting, and they've put a maverick law on the books; all unbranded cattle belongs to the state. You get that, Chinker? It's big, an' it's going to tear this country apart. But more than that, they're going to supervise all roundups, set the date in Cheyenne, and send representatives to check on all cattle drives. By next Fall it's going to wipe out the independent cattleman; only association members will manage to exist. As for the rustler, it will kill him for once and for all as far as large scale rustling goes. You get that?"

"What?" Chinker's mouth dropped an inch. "What the hell kind of a set-up is that, anyway?"

"You're not the only one to feel that way, Chinker. Every nester in the state will be up in arms. You see what's behind this gathering of forces here in the Tallows? The line's clear; the nesters and rustlers have to stick together or be frozen out. And it's too damned late to do anything about it. It's going to happen just as sure as God made little green apples. For the cattleman nothing could be better, although some of the smaller men won't feel that way about it."

"Yeah, shore, I see that," Chinker protested. "But how about that? Where do you come in? Sidin' the nesters is cuttin' your own throat, ain't it?"

"I said you wouldn't see it, damn you, Chinker! But it's clear and it's big—so damned big it scares me! Listen to this: Supposing the nesters and the small time ranchers here in the Tallows combine with the rustlers in the brakes; supposing Nate Chantelle was to put his weight with them. You see how it'll drag every loose ranny on the run to cut a slice of the pie? They'll stage the biggest roundup the Territory ever saw and they'll swing it before the legislature can act on their new laws. There won't be a single maverick or stray left in these mountains. It will break half the ranchers in Wyoming. The men behind the drive will come up with the biggest haul any rustler ever dreamed of. And with ready cash —" Chayme Baxter's heavy face was sweating, his eyes almost closed, so intense were his thoughts. "I'm not thinking of the cattle drive, nor what I can get out of it. If that was all, I'd see every nester in Wyoming in hell before they'd put a brand on a single cow. But there's more. Half the ranches are going to be stripped. I can buy in for a song. They won't want to buck the association and the new state laws, an' the combined rustler-nester forces. But a man who owned half the spreads in the state—a man like that, Chinker, could buck them. He could rule Wyoming. Such a break comes a man's way once in a lifetime. It's here now. By Spring, I'll be ready. And the men who ride with me will see more gold than any man has a right to hope for."

Chinker Kaye licked his lips. The enormity of the scheme appalled him. To steal a hundred head of cattle countenanced a large raid. But to stage an illegal roundup on the scale that Baxter proposed—

"Good Lord!" he breathed. "It just might work. It just might work!"

"It will work! I'll see to that."

"But Nate Chantelle—you think he'd go along?"

"If he won't, Butch Cassidy will. One swings as much weight as the other. And Nate will come to terms. He's ridden the Owlhoot half his life. Here's his chance to make it pay off. You think he'll throw it away? That's insane. He'll eat out of my hand."

The rustler nodded. "I can't figger the angles. Guess I'm too damned dumb for that. These bull-headed nesters—how anybody can get them into line, I don't know. But you're goin' to need one hell of a batch of men. These ranchers ain't goin' to take it layin' down. They'll stand up an' fight. Somebody's goin' to get hurt."

"I know that, Chinker. That's why I intend to line up the hardest damned bunch of rannies these mountains have ever seen. For fifty years the Hole-in-the-Wall and the Red Wall country have held the toughest men in America; for the first time I'm goin' to band them together. All hell will break loose; the governor will get out troops; but before them blue-jackets can get started, we'll be through. Even the pieces will be picked up—by me."

"I'm your man," Chinker said. "But I can tell you this, there's one big rock in your path, and his name's Blade Talbot. Him an' Nate Chantelle rode together. That's the talk, anyways. If Chantelle sides with him not even Butch Cassidy will sit in."

Chayme Baxter closed both eyes, slowly. "There are ways, Chinker. But I can tell you this—Nate Chantelle will ride with us. As for Talbot—"

"You can leave him to me," Chinker said.

"I'll do that. But if you slip up this time —" Baxter held up one closed fist. "One more thing, Kaye. That kid, Tod Breen. He won't fit in. Use him where you can. He'll make it that much easier for us. But when the payoff comes, he isn't to be around."

"What's that?" Chinker stared in surprise. Then slowly a light dawned behind his eyes, and his crooked grin slid into place. "Aw,

hell, I get it. Maudie Sanner. I'd heard you was purty soft—"

"Shut up, Chinker!"

The small rustler looked into the big man's oddly wild eyes and shut up. There was a burning, driving ambition mirrored there, and craziness of a sort, but the one thing that stood clear, that frightened Chinker very badly, was the bald hint of death written so plainly. Death for him, and for anyone else who might cross Chayme Baxter's chosen path to empire in the West.

VI

BLADE TALBOT rode out before dawn. There had been no more snow, but there had been a ring around the moon the night before, and frost whitened the slopes of the mountains where he rode. He frowned thoughtfully, plucked at his lower lip. Virgil Thompson's party for Beth would be the last of the social doings for the winter. The long weeks of isolation would be soon full upon them, and he welcomed them. A man would have time to think, and to allow the one plan he had made to come to pass. He could count on Gusty Boone—but was it the wise move? Gusty knew the danger involved, and was all for it. If the talk about Nate Chantelle siding with the nesters was true, Gusty would be riding to his death. But Nate had not yet decided, and Blade still felt the chances were good that Nate would side with him.

He rode with some purpose, urging his horse on across the rugged shelf-lands of the gaunt base of High Dome. The Dome itself lay before him, the blue and ochre cliffs startlingly clear, thrust up as abruptly as if sliced with a knife; like a great, huge pudding of solid rock, festooned with a topping of mighty pines. Closer to the base, the horse found rougher going, fallen talus and rock littering the ground. Around this Blade let the horse pick its own way and pace, but once beyond, where the gentle benches ran outward to the eastern valley, he quickened the pace.

The sun was an hour high when he saw the tiny cluster below him, and the tall column of smoke standing erect into the sky. There were three wagons in the group, and he made out several adult figures as he rode into the camp.

The wagons were still new; the painted sides glistening with the wetness of the morning frost. The canvas tops were still white, and the stock seemed in good shape. Three men were lined up before the fire. The tallest, a white-haired man with a strong face, folded his arms; the shortest, no more than a boy, with a shock of black hair pushing over his eyes, cradled a rifle in his arms, and stood with one foot forward, half-belligerently. The other was a small man, slight of build, with a full reddish beard.

Blade rode in, stopped. "Howdy," he said. His eyes moved past the men, to the new-rope corral holding the stock, and the evidence of new-sawn timber.

"Hello yourself," the black-haired youth returned. He half turned to the tall, elderly man. "Gramps, this's Talbot. I seed 'im in Pine t'other night."

"Talbot." The old man's voice was deep, booming. His smile came slowly. "I'm glad to know you," he said. "Our name is Fronch. We're from Missouri."

Blade nodded. "You've been here a week. You're on High Dome land." He waved an arm toward the east. "From the Dome to the Red Wall it's granted land; not government-owned."

The tall man seemed to recoil, as if struck. He looked at the youngest man. The boy moved forward. "The hell you say!" he barked.

Blade ignored him. "You were the first nesters to move west of the Tallows. I've waited to see what you were doing. If you went on past Dome land, well and good. You're not my problem."

"You're damned right we're not!" the boy flashed. "You stinkin' ranchers think you own the world."

"Shut up, Tay," the slender, red-haired man said. "Let's hear this out."

"I've heard a-plenty!" the boy argued, but lapsed into silence. Blade continued to ignore him.

"I came myself," he said. "I didn't want any misunderstandings. What you do is your business. But you'll have to get off Dome land."

"And if we don't?" the red-bearded man spoke softly.

"Trouble for you," Blade said. "You've

got no stand. This isn't open range. It's deeded land. Understand that."

"How do we know that?"

"I've just told you."

The boy laughed jarringly. "So what? You can't bluff us out. We don't scare."

"Sonny, I'm not trying to scare you." Blade eased himself in the saddle. "You do what you decide. Until Spring you can stay here. But when the ground thaw comes —be gone."

The three of them stood very still as Blade wheeled his horse and rode away. "Dammit, anyway!" he muttered to himself. "Now they'll think they'll have to stay here just to show me." It was a problem without an answer. The lines of his mouth grew hard and firm.

BRANT was standing at the far end of the bar when Nate Chantelle came in. The gunfighter's faded blue eyes hardened when he saw Brant. He nodded his head and stepped up to the bar. He was pouring whiskey into a glass when Brant moved up beside him.

"Hello, Nate," the saloon owner said. "Night wind's gettin' colder."

"Sure is."

"Somebody askin' for you, Nate."

"Let 'im." The outlaw lifted the glass to his mouth, drained it, shuddered. "Rawgut," he said. "Why don't you put in some good likker, Brant?"

"Because your belly's corroded from rawgut an' you'd think you was drinkin' water," Brant returned. He frowned, looked about. The place was half-dark. Only a half dozen men were in the room. Girls in brightly colored gowns sat at tables, played cards or just stared at the walls. Even the piano was silent. "Look, Nate, it's someone important. Better see him."

Chantelle nodded. "Ahuh. What have I got to lose?"

He followed Brant toward the back. They pushed through a beaded curtain, went down a long hall that smelled of stale food from the kitchen in the back, stopped at a door. Brant pushed it open, waited for Chantelle to enter, but the gunman shook his head.

"Nobody walks behind me, Brant. Remember that."

The other man shrugged, stepped into the lighted office first. A man sat behind the broad desk, and looked up as they entered. He didn't smile. Nate Chantelle felt a thin nervous start run through him. The man was Chayme Baxter.

"Get out, Brant," Baxter said. He stood up, leaned across the desk putting his weight on his huge hands. The saloon keeper closed the door behind him. The room was small, lighted by two lamps, hung with draperies. There was a high, unpleasant stench to the room, a thickness to the air that Chantelle found hard to breathe.

"Guess I'm supposed to be surprised," he said. "I am. Not at your bein' here but at wantin' to see me."

"I don't like second-hand dealings," Baxter said. "This way we'll settle it. I'm not going to mince a lot of words, and I'm not going to lie to you. You know some of what's in my mind. I think you can guess the rest. I'm behind Brant. I staked him here. I own Tall Pine, lock stock and barrel. I've got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies, Chantelle. In order to do that I hire a lot of men. Men like Butch Cassidy and Chinker Kaye. Men like you, Chantelle."

"Men like me." The words were gentle. "I guess you're right. But you've taken your sweet damn' time about gettin' around to me. We've had no dealings before."

"I haven't needed you before, Chantelle." Baxter sat down. He dug out a cigar, threw a second on the desk. Chantelle took it. Baxter leaned forward to light it.

"You need me now?"

"That says it. I've got a lot of reasons behind me. Say a thousand of them to begin with." Baxter dumped a heavy leather bag on the desk. It jingled sweetly. Nate licked at his lips.

"That's a lot of money."

"Only a start." Baxter shrugged. "A small beginning. Because what I'm starting is going to take a lot of finishing. Maybe years."

"What about the Dome?" Chantelle waited.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

Baxter smiled. "I thought it might. It doesn't matter to me. Not one damned little bit."

"Chinker didn't think so when he jumped

Blade Talbot up at the Point last week."

"Chinker's a fool. He'd try his luck with you if he thought there was a thousand dollars in it." Baxter frowned at the tip of his cigar, drew smoke into his lungs, let it out. "I didn't pay Chinker a nickel for that. I didn't tell him to do it. It was his idea."

Nate let the words fall between them. "You're lying," he said.

"No. I said I wasn't going to lie to you. I'm not. Talbot hasn't bucked me. He won't. The Dome range is too isolated to mean anything to me. He's got water but I'd have to drive forty miles to get cattle to it. Forty miles away from the closest shipping point, then forty miles back. It wouldn't make sense. You see that?"

"I see it. It's puzzled me. You hate Talbot's guts."

"Sure I do. But I wouldn't touch a hair of his head."

"Meaning?"

Baxter shrugged once more. "Take it the way you see fit. I mean it. But we're getting away from what I wanted to say. I'm going to need you. You're going to be a big man, Nate. You're going to need me. Between us we can run this country. But you've got to be my man all the way."

Nate rocked back on his worn heels. "I'll think it over," he said.

"Do that." Baxter stood up slowly, towering over the smaller outlaw. "Meantime, buy yourself a good cigar." His huge hand shoved the bag of coins towards Chantelle. His eyes were bright.

Nate hesitated, turned towards the door. Then he turned and picked up the bag. It was heavy. He balanced it on his hand for a moment, then shoved it inside his belt. He wasn't smiling as he left the room but Chayme Baxter was.

BRANT came in and closed the door behind him. He was sweating despite the chill of the room.

"I don't like it, Chayme," he said. "Not a little bit."

"Ain't nobody asking you to," Baxter said. He stretched his arms out across the desk, linked his fingers. He closed his eyes, rocked back in the swivel chair. "Now we're ready," he said. "Everything working out here in Pine?"

"Hell, yes!" Brant chuckled. "Money's tight. I've laid it out purty free and easy. Made it plain I'm backin' Pine to the limit, and to hell with the ranches. I've put it across, just the way you wanted it. The store's giving all the credit necessary. The nesters are grabbing at the chance to dig in deep. There's a lot of wild talk about Spring, and they've held a few meetings. No trouble between the two factions yet. Maybe Pine being called the outlaw capital don't sit too well with some holy joes, but by and large they've swallowed the bait. Sidin' in with the brakes riders means a chance for them—they can all see that. We're ready when you are."

Baxter opened his eyes. "Fine going, Brant," he said.

"But you shore you can count on Chantelle?"

"I just paid the first installment on his soul, Brant. He's mine." Baxter started to rock back and forth in the chair, then abruptly he got up. "I saw Chinker Kaye. He's tied in with us. Give him anything he wants. If Nate gets too far out of line, we've still got Chinker and his boys."

"You goin' back to the CB tonight?"

"That's none of your business, Brant. But if it makes you happier, I'm riding into Horn tonight. Virgie Thompson's throwin' a wing-ding for his kid. And the word's been passed that Thompson's calling a meeting tonight. I'm going to be there."

He came around the desk, paused at the door. "You think too much, Brant. You're doing it now, trying to work an angle for yourself. There isn't any. None that you can tie down without my knowing it. Remember that."

Brant didn't reply. Baxter slammed the door behind them.

THE night was clear as Blade Talbot rode into Buffalo Horn. The lights of the town stood out against the blackness of the surrounding mountains clearly. In the far distance the yellow sword of a locomotive's light sliced the blackness apart, and the cheery whistle sounded faintly. The sky was free of storm sign, but it was getting cold; Blade's breath made tiny cotton puffs before him as he rode on.

When he turned into the far end of the

main street, he saw the bright gleam of lanterns hung across the street, and the blaze of lights about the Town Hall. Trust Virgil Thompson to give a party in a big way. Blade grinned, then rubbed a hand ruefully over the stubble of beard on his cheeks. He hadn't stopped at the Dome to get cleaned up. Only Thompson's urgent summons that he be there had brought him. He knew what the rancher had in mind, and couldn't work up an enthusiasm for it. And Beth Thompson would be angry. He thought of their last turbulent meeting and frowned.

Beth Thompson was twenty years old, and a girl who had known few restraints. The wildness of her passions, as short-lived as they were violent, were too well known for him to place any full meaning upon them. But just the same her frankness had been disconcerting.

"You're a cold-blooded devil, Blade Talbot, but I'll put my hoop on you, just wait and see!" He thought of her dark, flashing eyes, the almost boldness of her words. "I've had my fun. Now it's time to quit. Dad's been hounding me to get married and I've picked you out. Aren't you flattered?"

His answer had been short. "Flattered, maybe, Beth, but not too pleased. I'm old enough to be your father. Get yourself some kid."

The casual certainty of her voice had broken. Only for a moment, but it had shown him a depth to her nature he had never suspected. "Have it your way, Blade. But I mean it. You'll see."

He had seen her twice since then, but each time accidentally and briefly. Nothing more had been said, but the level regard of her eyes had been directed at him and he grew uneasy under it.

Buckboards lined the streets, and people seemed to be milling about, a steady stream of riders moving down the street. Blade moved into the street, riding slowly, and taking it all in. He had known very little of the social life of the Territory; he had had no time for it. He knew men, liked some, disliked others. He had had business dealings with most, but the Dome was an isolated range, and of recent years, since Tall Pine had become the center of homesteading activities, few travelers had stopped by. For himself, Blade had not minded, but it had cost Maudie a lot, had contributed to the wildness in Tod. The boy hadn't made friends easily. Their school years had been few, and the ride long and hard into Buffalo Horn's single school. But there had been gay summers when Maudie's friends had visited the Dome for days at a time, and he had enjoyed the happiness of the girl. Of late years it had stopped. Beth Thompson had been Maudie's one good friend, but something had alienated them, and Blade was sharp enough to realize it had been the brief, hot-headed affair between Beth and Tod.

He grinned; there were two pretty much alike, all but uncontrollable.

He rode down the street toward the stables, dismounted there, turned his horse over to the negro in charge. As he started back to the street, Gusty Boone's small, bow-legged figure appeared. The foreman of the Dome was sober, and dressed in his Sunday best. He grinned.

"Howdy, boss!" he greeted Blade. "Been expectin' yuh. Begun to think you wasn't goin' to show. Somethin' keep yuh?"

Blade shook his head. A thin-edged depression seemed to center in his head, and it would not be dispelled. If the coming Summer would just see an end to the troubles of the range, if the lengthy talk of statehood and active legislation came to pass— But he could not wait for that.

"No. To be honest, Gusty, I didn't feel much in the mood for a shindig."

"Trouble?"

"No more than usual of late. I saw the nesters in the east valley. Seemed to have some backing. Didn't take much to my warning to move on."

"Maybe I better send a couple of the boys over to move 'em out?"

"Not yet. We'll have enough trouble later. No use starting it now."

"Have it your way, boss," the foreman grumbled. "But me, I ain't so choosey about it. To hell with 'em all. The Dome can take care of itself. There ain't enough hardnuts in the brakes to break us. That goes for Mr. Gunslinger Chantelle, too."

"Thought you liked Nate, Gusty?"

"Hell, I do, only the damned cuss just ain't willin to admit white's white. I'm

tellin' yuh, he's goin' to be in the thick of it."

"Then he'll have to take his chances, Gusty."

"Reckon so," the foreman answered, gloomily. He peered uncertainly up at Blade. "Looky, boss, you shore you want to go through with this hyar deal?"

"Sure enough, Gusty, but I can't order a man to do my dirty work for me. The final answer is up to you. It isn't too late to back down."

"Never have yet, an' I guess I won't now. When you want me to start the ruckus?"

"Soon as you can. Make it good."

"Yuh can bet on it, boss!" Gusty groaned. "Give me an hour to make a drunk look like the McCoy, an' I'll try my hand at climbin' yore frame. Cain't say I'm goin' to enjoy it."

Blade held out his hand. "I'll ride into the brakes two weeks from tonight. You know the old line cabin we threw up the year we tried to work those draws? I'll be there sometime after dark." They shook hands, and Blade held the grip a moment longer. "And, Gusty—be careful. Be awful damned careful."

"Yuh can count on it, boss!" Gusty grinned crookedly. "Jist you set your jaw good an' hard because I'm goin' to make it look good."

Back on the street Blade walked alone. He couldn't get rid of the nagging worry that beset him. He paused once, struck by the determination to go back, to get Gusty, and call the whole thing off. Then he tightened his jaw and walked on. Gusty Boone knew what he was doing, and if any man in the Tallows could do the job, it was Gusty.

Blade drew his coat tighter across his chest, thrust his hands into the deep side pockets. Since Chinker Kaye's ill-timed attack, Blade had worn his gunbelt, and it felt awkward, clumsy. He felt the pressure of it against his hip, and his hand moved into the slit in the pocket to grasp the hard bone handles of the single-action Smith and Wesson.

For an hour or more each day he had worked with that gun. It was oiled, the seer filed down, capable of instant and repeated use. His hand felt raw at the base of the thumb where it struck when he threw the gun from his belt forward into line of fire. The movement was swift, perhaps not the equal of a trained gunfighter, but shooting was a natural thing with Blade Talbot. He could fire five chambers of the Smith and Wesson at a hundred paces into a space smaller than a single playing card. Spinning, pivoting on one leg, dipping forward, falling backward, his accuracy remained constant, and it was an accomplishment that had beaten faster men with a gun before now.

Thinking of his gun brought a sharp, clear picture of Nate Chantelle before him. The gunfighter had seen him at practice in years gone by, and whistled keenly through his teeth.

"Neat shootin', Blade. Lord help the man who relies on speed to down you. He'll hit you once, maybe twice, but the odds are good the shots won't kill you. And it's a damned cinch your first shot will kill him." He shook his head. "I've only seen one other man who could shoot accurately off-balance like that. His name was John Wesley Hardin."

Hardin! A cold finger traced its way down Blade's back. The driving instinct to kill before being killed, to make every shot count, no matter the difficulty— Hardin, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, a few others had that iron will. And it had preyed on Blade's mind for twenty years; he had pressed it back, fought it down. It was an underlying reason why, even now, he could not choose up sides. Only once during his fifteen years on this range had he allowed himself to break loose—and five men had died before he was through. They had hung the last three of the rustling band they had trailed and caught. It had served as a warning no others had broken to any extent. Until now. The thin throb of warning struck at him, and his jaws tightened.

As he came abreast the alleyway that led to the back of the hall, a woman's voice came clearly to him, stopping him instantly. Her words were sharp, angry: "Stop it, Chayme! You're hurting my arm."

It was Maudie's voice, and the tone of it, frightened, hurt, sent blind rage through him. He stepped into the alleyway, his hands doubling into fists.

VII

THE double doors leading into the hall were open, a string of colored lanterns above them, and just under them, to one side, two figures stood. Blade saw them, and his stride quickened. The girl saw him first.

"Blade!" she gasped.

Then Chayme Baxter swung around. His face was dark with passion, and his hand still grasped the girl's arm. Then he let her go, and some of the color drained from his face.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Talbot!" he barked.

"If you want to try pulling somebody's arm, Chayme, here's mine!" Blade's right arm snapped forward, and his fist struck heavily alongside Baxter's jaw. The man's hat flew from his head, and his knees sagged. Before Blade could strike again, Maudie was between them.

"Wait, Blade!" she cried out. "Chayme's playing the fool but he meant me no harm."

Men came out through the double doors, then, and spilled between them. Blade moved through them toward Baxter. "Keep away from her, Baxter!" he said. "I won't tell you twice."

Chayme Baxter bent, retrieved his hat. His face was pale. His hands were shaking as he put it on his head. "Let's not be damned fools about this, Blade," he said. "It's no secret the way I feel about Maudie. We were just having a little argument, that's all."

Blade turned slowly. The girl saw the hardness of his eyes, the set expression of his face. She did not know him like this. She nodded. "That's all it was—just a misunderstanding."

"All right, Baxter, leave it at that," Blade said. "But what I said goes. Keep away from Maudie."

For a single long instant passion worked in Baxter's face, then his iron will clamped down, and he nodded, shortly, swung about, and made his way through the gathering group of men into the hall.

The tall, thinnish figure of Virgil Thompson appeared. He held up his hands. "Here, now! Let's break this up. The fightin' comes after the dance, not afore the danged dance gits a fair start!" He saw Blade. "Blade, didn't figger it'd be you. More like a couple o' these young rannies with no better sense." He moved closer to them. "It don't make much sense gettin' bad blood atween you an' Baxter at this stage o' the game."

Blade stiffened. "I'm not playing a game, Virgil," he answered. "The Dome can take care of itself. That goes for its women, too."

Thompson nodded. "Have it your way." He grinned. "Glad to see you unbent enough to come, anyways. There'll be things said you ought to know." He waved his hand at the remaining men. "That's all now. Free likker out back but don't let your womenfolk catch you drinkin' it!" As the others thinned down, he paused beside Blade and Maudie. "Reckon Beth'll be plumb glad to see you, Blade."

Then he was gone. Blade turned to Maudie. "Maybe I butted in where I wasn't wanted, huh, Maudie?"

The girl's laugh reassured him. "No, Blade. Chayme didn't want to take no for an answer."

"Where's Tod? Didn't he bring you?"

She nodded. "But I think Tod found the whiskey barrel. He didn't come back. I was looking for him when I ran into Chayme. He wouldn't harm me, Blade. He—he's asked me to marry him."

"Marry him! He's older than I am."

"I think you know how I feel about that?"

Blade shook his head. "I don't understand you, Princess. What's wrong with Tod?"

"Nothing, Blade, if you say so."

"I wish you meant that."

"You don't wish it any more than I do, Blade."

Baffled, he stared at her. "Hands down, you beat me, Princess," he said. "What do you want if it isn't Tod?"

Her smile came, swiftly. "You may be the tall man of the Tallows, Blade, but you can't fool me. You were willing to fight Chayme Baxter just a moment ago."

"The Dome takes care of its own."

"Was that all it meant?" Her smile vanished. "Darn you, Blade Talbot, I won't forgive you for that."

She spun around and fled back into the hall. Blade stood there. He beat his two clenched fists together, then strode back down the alleyway. He needed a drink. All

he needed to make the mess complete was to start a fight with Chayme Baxter—and it had been close! Chayme wouldn't forget the blow; nor would Blade.

As he emerged from the alley, a man behind him called his name and he stopped and waited for Virgil Thompson to come up. Two men followed him. Blade knew them both as ranchers beyond Buffalo Horn.

"Blade, I figgered maybe you'd be a mite upset about the to-do, and it's just as well to get this business over with before the dance gets goin'. I've talked to Baxter. He said he'd made a damned fool play, and you'd misunderstood. He's willing to forget it. Hard words don't mean anythin' unless they're backed up. I'm askin' how you feel about meetin' Chayme right now, along with the rest of us."

"I said my piece to Baxter," Blade answered. "There's no more to it. I'm willing to listen to anything *you* have to say."

"Fair enough. Jake, you an' Frank there get the rest. We'll meet at the Stockmen's Saloon down the street. It'll be empty as long as there's free whiskey at the dance. Make it in fifteen minutes."

The two men went back. Virgil Thompson tugged at his scrawny mustache with one thick-fingered hand. But he didn't speak as they strode the boardwalk toward the Stockmen's Saloon. The street crowd was thinning out, and behind them the first strains of a waltz sounded. A man passing by waved to Thompson.

"Doin' yoreself proud, Virgie!" he called out.

The rancher squinted at Blade. "Reckon you know it ain't goin' to mean much to Beth if you ain't there, Blade."

"Don't be a fool, Virgil."

"I ain't, no more than usual. But I'd like nothin' better. I wanted you to know that. Beth's goin' to own the Spiderweb when I'm gone. It joins the Dome on the northeast. The two together would make the biggest ranch in the territory."

Blade felt himself caught between two blades of a vise. "All right, Virgil. I'll be at the dance. I'll see Beth. She's just a kid. Next week it'll be someone else."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Blade. Someone else, maybe someone like Chayme Baxter. She was strong on him a while back. It could start over again. Looks like Chayme's gettin' the cold shoulder from Maudie. I'd hate to see that, Blade."

"Dammit, Virgil, that's your business."

" 'Course it is. But ain't nothin' says a man cain't express his mind."

Silence fell between them. At the stockmen's club they turned in. At the bar Blade was surprised to see Tod Breen.

"Why aren't you at the dance, Tod?"

"Aw hell, Blade, me an' Maudie had a fight. I had to get away."

He had been drinking, but wasn't drunk. "Stay sober," Blade said. "You'll be driving Maudie home."

"Okay, okay!" The boy turned back to the bar. Virgil Thompson stared at him, then at Blade. His face was unreadable, but his back stiffened imperceptibly. They had a drink, and then men started coming in. A dozen in all arrived. Blade knew them. All ranchers, all on the western slopes of the Tallows. Two-thirds of the cattle in Wyoming Territory were owned by these fifteen men. Chayme Baxter made the fifteenth. He arrived last.

FOR a moment a strained silence ensued, then Virgil Thompson held up a hand. "We'll use the back room, boys."

They moved down the bar. Blade waited for Tod, and the boy joined him. Virgil Thompson came up, slowly. "Reckon Tod ain't interested in our talkin', Blade. Let him get back to the dance."

The words were fair enough, but there was another meaning behind them, one that Blade sensed, but could not label. "Tod's welcome to hear anything I do," he said slowly.

Other men turned, their faces masked by blandness. Tod straightened, looked from Blade to the others, then shrugged. "Hell, don't fuss about it, Blade. I ain't interested in your gab. I'll be at the dance."

Blade watched him go, then looked at Virgil Thompson. The rancher frowned at the floor. "Nothin' personal, Blade, only we agreed to principals only. Tod would be out of place."

Inside the back room a man closed the door, stood before it. Seriousness was marked on all their faces. Then Virgil

Thompson stepped into the center of the room.

"I want you all to hear what Chayme Baxter has to say. He's just come back from Cheyenne. It's important to every man in this room."

Baxter stepped up, towering over them all. His broad, thick-featured face was grim. "I don't have to tell you men what's goin' on in the Tallows. We've all lost stock excepting maybe Talbot here. The Dome's hard to get at for rustling. But he's also the closest to Tall Pine, and trouble, so it affects him, too. I'm going to make it plain to all of you. First off, Wyoming will be a state next year. The legislature is making laws now. You all know of the maverick law—all unbranded strays are to become state property; all roundups will be state supervised, and conducted on a grand schedule. It's going to mean bigger profits and more trouble between us. It isn't going to be dog eat dog any more. It's going to be big business—and stay that way. It's going to mean an end to organized rustling—and damned soon."

Men spoke then, harshly. But most stood in agreement to the new laws.

Chayme held up his hands. "There's been talk of open fighting. Of riding into Tall Pine and cleaning it out once and for all before it's too late. I say that's crazy talk. With a state government there's no need for individual action. I say it's time the ranchers of the Tallows got organized the way the nesters and rustlers have been organizing. Organize to regulate the cattle industry in Wyoming."

"Makes sense!" "Attaboy, Chayme!" "You tell 'em, Baxter!" Men milled. Thompson moved up.

"There it is short an' sweet. What affects one of us affects us all. We've got to stick together. It's in my mind we'll form a vigilante committee here an' now. We'll put law an' order in the Tallows an' we'll make it stick. Regulators, that's us."

"Regulators!" The name sprang up quickly. Baxter grinned broadly, and shook hands around. Only Blade remained still. Eyes focused on him.

"What's your say, Blade?" Virgil prompted.

"I've got none. You've said it all. But you can count the Dome out. We've enough troubles of our own without borrowing the other fellow's. I'll help any of you any way I can. That's as far as I go along. You think by banding together you'll put a force in the field that will stop trouble before it begins. None of you really believe that. When trouble comes you take care of it. That's the way it's always been done. That's the way I see it now."

Silence edged the room. Men looked uncertainly at one another. Thompson shook his head. "You're a stubborn fool, Blade Talbot! You'll understand what this means when the Dome's hit hard."

"When the Dome's hit I'll hit back. Goodnight."

The man at the door swung it open and Blade stepped through. The damned fools! Regulators! Trouble-makers, more like! The men of Tall Pine wouldn't run just because the ranchers paraded like tin soldiers across the Tallows!

On the street, Blade paused. He rubbed a hand over his stubbled cheek, then swore. He'd promised Virgil he'd stop in at the dance, and he owed that much, at least to Beth Thompson. He started down the street, and slowly the depressing mood of the day passed. When he caught the first sound of the music, a thin grin twisted his mouth. Let them have their fun, It would be a long, cold winter. Surprisingly, he felt regret he had not stopped at the Dome and spruced up.

The town hall had been gussied up. Paper stringers hung from the rafters, and on the raised platform an orchestra made loud music. Couples pranced on the floor in graceful steps. He saw Tod's curly hair, and beside him, smiling up at him, Maudie. The mercurial temperaments had subsided and they were obviously having a good time. But somehow he felt no lift, no gratification in the sight. The moody, unpredictable Tod— Had he failed the boy in some way?

"Jealous of Tod, Blade?" a hand grasped his arm, and he looked down into the upturned face of Beth Thompson.

"Jealous of my own kid?"

"Don't pretend, Blade. You're not his father. I know the story of how you rode

into the Tallows. Is it true you rode with Nate Chantelle, a hunted man?"

He grinned. "True it is. Didn't you know they hung me for a rustler the first day I hit the Brakes?"

"Stop it, Blade, the light touch doesn't suit you."

"Reckon it doesn't at that. Just the same, Beth—happy birthday."

"Thank you for that." She stared at him. "Blade, you weren't going to come, were you? I mean until you heard about Dad's meeting with the other ranchers?"

"Don't take too much for granted, young lady. I grant I don't look like I'm prepared for a party but I plumb forgot about your dance until it was too late to get back to the Dome before riding into Buffalo. I came like I was. Forgive me for that?"

"A women would forgive you anything, Blade Talbot. But that's something you wouldn't understand."

"Guess not. Must say I've never had to kick 'em out of my way to walk, 'though."

"Haven't you?" Her voice was serious. "Maybe it wouldn't hurt as much as being ignored by you. I've even heard you visit that woman Marl Wright in Pine."

"She's an old friend, Beth. Nothing more."

"It makes talk. But you're used to that. The tall man. How many times I've heard you called that! I used to wonder what it meant when I was a kid. Then when I started to grow up I saw you riding the Tallows. I used to follow you. You were big—but not that big—not even as big as Chayme Baxter. Then one day I heard a rider at the Spiderweb talking about you, how you'd run a man away from Marl Wright's place in Pine. I heard his voice when he spoke your name, saw the fear of you that rode him so hard. And I understood."

He moved uneasily. "You can't tell a man by the shadow he throws on the ground, Beth."

"I guess not." She laughed.

"You know not. But I didn't come here to gab with the hostess all night. Look at them fellers staring holes in me! Am I too late to ask for a dance?"

"You can have them all."

"Reckon not if I want to leave Buffalo Horn alive. I'll settle for the next waltz. Fair enough?"

She nodded, and he moved on. He felt her watching him, even when she swept by in the arms of Chayme Baxter, and it made him uneasy. There was a grin of triumph on Baxter's face.

He found Maud and Tod at the punch-bowl. The girl was flushed and happy. She smiled at him. "Save a dance, Princess?" he demanded.

"Darned tootin', podnuh!" she returned, mimicking his Texas drawl adroitly. "I saw you talking with Beth, Blade. She's very pretty."

"Not as pretty as you." A fiddle see-sawed, and a man's stentorian call rang out through the hall.

"Grab your partners! We're a-fixin' to skeedaddle!"

Laughter rang out. Men and women thronged the floor. Maudie took his arm, and guided him towards the floor. The men lined up in a single long row, the women opposite them. Then the fiddle sawed out a harsh melody, and the beat of the player's foot accented the rhythm. The horn player joined in, and the caller's orders rang out.

"Spot yore heifer—single 'er out!

"Once around her—grab her, hug her, spin 'er about!

"Now back'ards, back'ards—turn an' prance—

"For'ard—for'ard—looky at 'em dance!"

BYSTANDERS started to clap in harmony with the music, and the pace quickened. Blade found himself grinning down at Maude. For the single brief moment his troubles were forgotten. They danced together.

The uproar started down the floor from them. Couples were jerked rudely back, and then a grotesque, stomping, prancing figure came up the line between the gathered couples. Blade felt a tingling thrill shoot down his spine. It was Gusty Boone, and he was playing his role of drunken cowboy to the hilt.

For a moment Maudie grinned at the cowboy, then her smile faded. She looked up at Blade. "Gusty acts like he's gone loco."

Blade walked toward Gusty, took his arm. "Here, Gusty! What you trying to do, wreck

this shindig?"

The wicked good humor peeled away from Gusty's freckled face, leaving it ugly, mean. "Take your hands off'n me!" he shouted.

"To hell with you, Mister Tall Man Talbot! I do as I damned well please. An' it pleases me to raise hell right this minute."

"You're drunk, Gusty," Blade said. He let his face go slack. "Go back to the Dome. We want no trouble here."

Blade was aware of puzzled stares. He saw Chayme Baxter beside Beth Thompson, looking sharply at him and Boone. Virgil Thompson stepped up.

"Looky here, Boone, reckon you've done enough. Supposin' you try yore hand at carryin' a jug o' likker back to the Dome with you?"

"Jist supposin' you was to try mindin' yore own business, you damn' ol' goat!" Gusty roared. "I'm a long-haired lobo an' I'm lookin' fer trouble! Eeeeyoww!"

"Wait a minnit, young feller," Thompson said testily. Blade read danger signs in his voice. He stepped in quickly, grabbed Boone's arm.

"Off you go, Gusty. You can sleep it off at the Dome."

"Like hell I will!" Gusty tore himself free. His face was red, and his pale eyes blazed. "Blade Talbot—I ain't gonna stomach no more o' yore damn' orders. I ain't no snivelin' kid you can boss aroun'. I do as I please."

"Gusty!" It was Maudie, staring at him as if she had never seen him before. "What's wrong with you?"

"A lot o' damned mean things, I reckon, includin' you! You're just like Blade heah, sittin' back an' doin' all the orderin aroun'. I've had a bellyfull of it. You figger yo're too damned fancy to dance with the likes o' me, but by heck, yo're goin' to!"

He made a clumsy grab at her, and the girl drew back. Then Blade struck his arm down. Gusty whirled instantly, rage transforming his homely face into an ugly mask. "Yo're askin' for it. You been askin' a damn' long time, now yo're gettin' it!" Gusty stepped in quick, his left hand moved in a practiced jab. Blade tried to go under it, but Gusty was waiting, crossed with his right. The solid thwack! of the blow was audible throughout the hall.

Sparks flew crazily in Blade's head. For an instant wild anger stirred inside him, then he caught himself. His legs trembled but he didn't go down. He moved forward, pumped in his left hand. His right was blocked. Then Gusty came through with a haymaker that landed flush on Blade's jaw. The bigger man went down to his right knee.

Before he could regain his feet, men surged in between them. Blade masked his relief, and Gusty ranted and raved, tried to get free and come at him again.

"You're through on the Dome, damn you!" Blade yelled.

"That suits me fine!" Gusty returned. "You think you're a big man, Blade Talbot, but I'll show how damned small you are before I get through with you!"

His drunkenness seemed to have evaporated. He shook himself free of the restraining hands and tore his way out of the hall.

The caller held up his hands, and the fiddler renewed his assault on the music of the reel. "All together now, spin and turn—"

The dance went on, but a nagging worry refused to leave Blade Talbot's mind. It was Gusty Boone's play now. If he made a mistake—Blade refused to let the thought take shape in his mind.

VIII

PROGRESSIVE waves of gray cloud lined the cobalt skies of Wyoming, and tons of white were dumped on the towering peaks and ridges, spreading over the land in a cascade of white snow drifts. The ranches called in their men from the far-flung line cabins; cattle drifted slowly down into the meager grazing lands of the valleys; and the bitter winter winds sang songs through the tiptilted world of the mountain lands. The great Red Wall itself whitened, except where sheer drops stood out, dark-streaked and ugly in the wilderness of white. The High Dome was encrusted with snow, the great pines that overhung it adroop with white weight that bent them down over the rugged cliffs.

For Blade Talbot, the weeks went by quietly. He rode when he had to, and such

work as was possible was done about the ranch. He sensed the growing rebellion in Tod at being cooped up so much, and invented reasons for sending the boy into Buffalo Horn as often as possible. As for Maudilene, his puzzlement grew. She was morose and happy by turns; and often he would catch her eyes upon him, not pensive, but rather speculative, as if she were waiting for something to change him, something to happen to him.

This morning he had ridden out from the Dome, westward, toward the valley where he had sent the nesters. Of the second family group below the Dome, he had seen nothing, but Charley Prentiss, who had replaced Gusty Boone as foreman had told him they had set up a crude shebang, woodplank sided, and flimsy. Twice Virgil Thompson had ridden in from Buffalo Horn, each time asking him to reconsider his stand and join the Regulators. The talk was hard, and growing. A family of nesters in the Tallows had been burned out; Chayme Baxter reported the theft of a hundred head of cattle; Thompson's foreman had shot a man on Spiderweb land. Blade shook his head, and his eyes narrowed.

Off to his right the sharp-lined features of the Dome stood out. The majestic challenge of it was compelling, oddly influencing his thoughts. He reined in and let his eyes sweep from infinity to infinity, across the snow-blanketed range, broken by tumbling ridges and the gigantic looming shape of the Dome itself. One man's domain; one man's empire. And yet, for the first time, he sensed that it wasn't enough. The feeling was strange, hard for him to orient himself to. But its presence was becoming sharper.

Was it Maudilene that was making this change in him that he could sense? First Marl Wright, then Beth Thompson had intimated as much, yet the thought seemed ridiculous. He wanted nothing more than for Maudie and Tod to strike it off, to set the pattern of their lives for him to see and approve. Yet it would never be like that, he knew now. They weren't children any longer. His will could not be their final answer any longer. They had to find their own destiny, and Blade could see defeat for his hopes in it.

Women had never played an important part in his life. He had worked too hard to let down, even for a few precious hours. And, perhaps because of his own lack, women were drawn to him. He could sense the feeling in Marl; and Beth's boldness amused him when it did not worry him. As for Maudie—he shook his head in puzzled exasperation. The girl was beyond him. Coupled with his worries about Tod—

His thoughts vanished as he saw a movement below him, close under the bluff where he sat his horse. For a moment he tensed, his face hardening, then slowly the frown vanished. A small herd, some fifteen head of cattle, was being driven south toward the brakes. One rider came behind them, harassing them, and the man's figure was familiar. Then he saw Blade, and waved a hand. Gusty!

Blade dug in his spurs and rode down. Boone rode up the broken land to meet him. It was their first meeting since the dance. Gusty's grin was heartwarming.

"Howdy, boss!" he called out. "I was jist hopin' somebody'd show up to give me a hand with these damned cows. Rustlin' ain't all it's cracked up to be an' I'm beginnin' to figger I picked a pore time o' the year for it."

As he rode close he brought his rawboned hands up to blow on them. His breath made a vapor trail. He grinned at Talbot. "Funny thing, too, my danged conscience ain't botherin' me a mite!"

"Guess you're just a natural-born thief, Gusty," Blade returned. He thrust out his hand. "Looks like you're getting to it."

"Shore. Thet was a fine leetle set-to we staged in Horn, but it ain't enough by itself. Got to make my mark plain. Figgered drivin' these cows into Tall Pine might swing the trick. I could use the dough, too. Make a better show, buyin' drinks for the crowd an' goin' to hell in a high class, money-spendin' way."

"Good idea. I'll give you a hand as far as the ridge. Better go it alone from there. Some ranny might get the smart idea of back-trackin' you."

"In this weather? He'll have a helluva lot o' nerve, not to say a mighty tough hide. It's been cold enough this week to freeze the tail off'n a brass monkey. Jist the same, I

reckon you're right."

They moved on together, bunching the herd, driving between drifts, edging them constantly south. Gusty frowned at the height of the Dome.

"Reckon Maudie didn't think much of my performance at the dance, huh?"

"To put it plain, Gusty, she raised hell!" Blade shook his head. "She cussed you for starting the trouble, and me for letting you. But I don't think she smelled a rat. If anything, she's convinced you've gone loco."

"Ain't thet hell?" Gusty groaned. "But I reckon it's one way o' gittin' things straightened out. Boss, I been in Pine, an' also layin' out in the brakes. The setup's queer. You ain't goin' to like hearin' this but Nate Chantelle's generally looked on as the boss. Him an' Brant's thicker'n thieves, an' Chinker Kaye hangin' on the edge. Some of them nesters jist wasn't havin' any part of the deal. Then Virgie Thompson's Regulators began raisin' hell, an' now they're comin' around. Somethin' big's in the wind. What's behind it I don't know. But I'm gettin' a hunch. It's pretty plain there's two factions. Chantelle an' Brant an' the nesters, with Chinker sittin' in. Then somebody else, off yonder, waitin' for somethin' to break. No name, no nothin'. But you can bet yore wad it ain't a nester. An' it ain't nobody ridin' the Trail. Funny thing is, I keep thinkin' about Virgie Thompson, but damned if I can see how that can be."

"Thought you were strong on Chayme Baxter?"

"I am. But he's drivin' the Regulators crazy tryin' to keep 'em whipped up. Don't seem like he'd be gougin' from both ends like thet if it was him. However, I get your hunch thet the Regulators would be a damned fine coverup for somebody. Both ends against the middle—an' you're the middle." Gusty waved his hand. "One thing I am sure of an' that's that Chinker Kaye's in the know. I'm goin' to get in with that ranny an' sort o' ride herd on him until something pops."

"Play it your way, Gusty. I've got nothing to offer in the way of advice. But be careful and be sure."

At the ridge line, Blade reined in and watched the bantam-sized cowboy herd the cattle over the rim down into the white jumble of the brakes. Boone stood in the stirrups to turn and wave at him, then a turn of the deepening canyons cut them off from sight, and Blade rode back along the west bench of the Tallows.

It was an hour past noon when he rode into the timbered valley to the west. For a moment he was surprised; a corral fence was up, and a respectable ranch house. The unpeeled timber sides of the cabin were high, and the sod roof in good repair. The old trappers' cabin had been repaired and rebuilt until it was no longer recognizable. A stack of cordwood was piled behind the kitchen lean-to, and a thin plume of pine-smoke stood up into the sky. For a moment Blade considered riding in, then he shook his head and turned his horse. It was obvious the family was taking care of itself.

GUSTY BOONE made a show of his money in Tall Pine. He had disposed of the cattle, and it had sealed his fate in accordance with the ways of the West. He was a known rustler now, and it was a strange feeling to walk the streets of a town knowing that every man he met knew him for what he was. He shook his head as he raised his glass of whiskey to his mouth. His eyes took in Brant's place; he saw the girls at the far end of the bar, was aware of the jangling piano, the muffled voices of men, but his attention was centered on two men who stood close by. Luther Brant and Nate Chantelle.

Nate Chantelle was looking steadily at him, Gusty knew. He deliberately set his drink down, walked towards him. He moved slowly, cautiously, and stopped some feet distant. "Seen enough, Nate?" he challenged.

The gunman nodded. "Shore, Gusty. Plenty." But his voice was puzzled. "Hear your luck's gettin' better."

"I ain't complainin'," Gusty said. He made his voice rusty with subdued anger. "But I ain't partial to people starin' at me."

"Pull in your horns, cowboy," Brant put in hurriedly. "We were just talking about you."

"Anything good?"

"Stop it, Gusty, we're not ridin' you. Why're you on the prod?" Nate grinned. "Hell, I've known you ten years."

"Yep. Maybe too damned long people have known me in these parts. I'm goin' to melt this snow off'n my hide an' ride south."

Brant looked at Nate, then back at Gusty. "A man needs a stake for a trip like that," he said. "A hundred and fifty bucks won't take him."

It was the amount he had been paid for the stolen steers which he had clumsily changed into a Hat brand with a running iron. He let his mouth drop a little. "Yeah, I been thinkin' about that," he said, and turned abruptly away, went back to his drink.

He saw Brant speak to Chantelle, then the outlaw left the saloon. After a few moments, Brant came up beside him. "Mind tellin' me what the trouble with Talbot was all about? It don't happen just like that."

"I don't give a damn who knows!" Gusty hissed. "I've had my bellyfull of Talbot. When he told me to stay away from—" he broke off. "Damn you, it's none o' your business."

Brant moved back hastily. "Hold on, Boone, I'm tryin' to do you a good turn. Maybe I can help you get that stake you were talking about. But I've got to be sure where you stand."

"If you don't know now, you ain't ever goin' to."

"Maybe that's right." Brant's eyes narrowed. "It's the girl. I might've expected that. I knew it was something."

"Think anything you damned well please."

"Look, Boone, a man's got to take what he gets. You'll get nowhere ridin' every gent you talk to. Lay off. I said I could help you." Brant lowered his voice. "Get out of town. Chantelle's riding into the brakes tonight. Go with him. He'll be waiting out of town a mile. You'll stay with Chinker Kaye until you get word from me. Chinker's boss when Nate's not there. A hundred a month and share alike on what we get. That sound good?"

"It sounds good," Gusty returned. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "So do a lot of things."

"I said Nate Chantelle would take you in. Isn't that good enough?"

Gusty pretended to worry the idea in his mind, then finally nodded. He drained his glass, hunched his shoulders. "All right, Brant. You've done me a turn. I won't forget it."

A half hour later he put his horse to the snowy slopes of the road out of Tall Pine.

NINE weeks of winter were past the day that Tod Breen rode into the brakes. It was early morning, and he rode carefully. He had spent the night in Tall Pine, and his thinly handsome face was unshaven, smudged with blotches under his eyes. He reined in at the mouth of the canyon passage, startled. It had been two months since last he'd ridden in to see Chinker Kaye, and in those months the hideout had changed. The single cabin still stood on the timbered benchland, but about it three mud-walled shebangs had been erected, along with three canvas-topped clapboard shacks. It had the appearance of a new town or a booming ranch. But Tod Breen knew it for what it was, and shook his head in wonder.

While he was aware of the forces growing in the Tallows, he had not realized that Chinker Kaye's plans had grown so alarmingly. For the first time a doubt began to creep into his mind. Until now he had accepted Chinker for what he had seemed to be, and had accepted his own fear of the man as casually. But now, with a growing band of outlaws in the brakes under Kaye's control the whole thing was changing, and worry began to gnaw at his mind. What if Chinker should decide he had outlived his usefulness? Penny-ante rustling had always existed in the Tallows, but the Dome had never been hard hit. Until this moment Kaye's threats had seemed just words, signifying nothing; but the hardness behind them was becoming fully evident.

Tod urged his horse on, then reined in abruptly, tensed in the saddle. Below him he saw a familiar figure, short, bowed of leg, moving out from the house. Gusty Boone! Here with Chinker! Tod felt sweat start on his face, for even now he could not bring himself to expose his connection with the outlaws to Gusty. He reined his horse back the way he had come.

He had ridden but a short distance into the canyon when a man hailed him. He halted. The horseman moved towards him. He recognized Chinker.

"Where the hell was you goin'?" Chinker bit out.

"Brant told me you wanted to see me," the boy returned uneasily.

"Then why the hell didn't you ride in an' wait for me?"

Tod shrugged. "I—I saw Gusty down there. I'd heard he'd turned rustler but I didn't know he was down here."

Chinker's face twisted. "So you saw him. So what?"

"He—I didn't want him to see me."

"Why not?" Chinker urged his horse closer. He peered into the boy's face as if to read his deeper thoughts. He tugged at his lower lip for a moment. "You're both in the same boat. I don't get it."

"Aw, hell, Chinker, my association with you was supposed to be a secret. Now—"

"Nothing's changed except for the better." Chinker frowned. "But that ain't what's eatin' on you. It's Boone. You don't trust him bein' here."

"I didn't say that," Tod put in.

"Maybe not, but that was your thought. Maybe he'll tell Blade Talbot, that's what you're thinkin', an' I've thought the same thing myself afore now."

"But I don't understand. He's here in the brakes with you—"

"Nobody says you got to understand. Shut up." Chinker closed his eyes. He opened them to peer into the boy's face. "But there's one way we can find out, Tod! You're damn' tootin' there is! An' Nate Chantelle ain't due back from Buffalo Horn until tomorrow night." He laughed coarsely. Then the laugh died, and his right hand made a swift, sudden movement, and he levelled his gun across the pommel of the saddle at Tod's midriff. "Just sit still, kid, an' open your ears! You an' me are goin' to have a leetle talk."

IT TOOK Blade Talbot two hours to force his way through the drifts of snow to the ridge line between the Dome and the Tallows Brakes, a ride that in summer weather would have taken but a few minutes.

The sides of his horse were billowing as the animal surged upward in spasmodic leaps and bounds, then the steel-shod hoofs caught bare rock, and secure footing, and the animal scampered onto the wind-bald crest of the ridge and stopped without urging, head low.

A wilderness of white, scarred by ugly serrations of upthrust rock, and broken by the kettle-shaped Dome, lay about him. Ahead of him were the brakes, snow-drifted, all but impassable. He shook his head. Weeks had passed since the day he had helped Gusty drive the Dome herd down into the canyon country; weeks without a message or word from the bantam cowboy. But they had agreed to meet once a month at the line cabin on the ridge if Gusty couldn't make it to the ranch. The month was over, and Blade's worries were stronger. Gusty might object, but it was time to end the masquerade and bring Gusty back to the ranch.

Blade eased himself in the saddle, narrowing his eyes against the gray-white glare of the snow. Dark snow-clouds stood up from the Tallows to the east, and there was a growing wind. But the line cabin was not distant, and he and Gusty could spend the night there with a warm fire, and ride back to the Dome when it cleared. The thought was comforting, even though the long weeks had passed and he had reached no decision. He rubbed at his cold cheeks thoughtfully and shook his head. After a few moments he urged his jaded horse on.

It began to snow an hour before sunset, and the dark day went black. But the wind kept the ridge itself clear saving for a few drifts, and he urged the horse around these. Full night fell abruptly, and he pulled his sheepskin coat tighter about him. His hands were numb, even stuffed into the fleece-lined pockets of his greatcoat.

He was almost to the cabin when he first saw the yellow gleam of windows through the snow. As he rode nearer, he saw the windows were not fully alight, but danced with yellow-red glows. He grinned. Good old Gusty. He was waiting, with a fire blazing away. It would be good to have him back, whether he had succeeded in his mission or not.

He rode his horse around to the lean-to at the rear of the cabin. Gusty's animal was there.

Rubbing his hand over its back, Blade

felt the warmth. Gusty couldn't have been here long. He dumped oats from a bag into a bin, then hustled out into the snow. He stumbled once, put a hand out to keep himself from falling. Funny that Gusty wouldn't have heard him, and given some sort of challenge.

A sort of tension went through Blade, stringing him erect, and his right hand slipped through the slit in his coat, fumbled for the cold handle of his gun. He paused at the single window and tried to peer in but the yellow-red flames of the fireplace were blinding. The rest of the single room was in shadow. He stepped onto the porch slowly.

He pressed aaginst the door, lifting the string latch slowly. The door squeaked once as he shoved it open, then warm air struck his face, and his eyes watered. He stepped through the door, stood still. The cabin was silent. Grotesque shadows moved up the walls. He started for the fireplace, then stopped, a cry rising in his throat as something monstrous and black swept past him, almost striking him.

Then he caught himself, and his right hand freed the revolver, brought it out. He was breathing hard. The fireplace cracked loudly; the wind whistled keeningly under the sod-packed eaves. Then the ugly thing swung back and a cry was torn from his lips. It was the body of a man, swinging listlessly from the rafters, a rawhide rope about his throat.

"Gusty!" Shock and horror were in Blade's voice, and he reached forward, as if there were anything he could do now for the foreman of the Dome. Then he stopped, and his back went cold as there was a sound behind him.

He spun about, bringing his gun up—but too late.

He saw a man's face looming close behind him, shadowed red and sardonic in the firelight. Then the gun in Chinker Kaye's knotted fist slammed against his head, and Blade Talbot went down. He sensed falling, tried to catch himself, his head ringing from the blow. He saw Chinker's boots thud close to his face, then Chinker bending down.

"Sucker!" Chinker cried triumphantly, launching his second blow.

IX

CHINKER straightened slowly, his crooked grin remaining in place, his eyes moving up to meet those of Tod Breen who moved slowly out of the shadows. The boy was staring at the slowly swaying form of Gusty Boone, and he licked at his mouth repeatedly. Chinker laughed, and dug the toe of his boot brutally into the unconscious Blade's ribs.

"What's the matter, kid, first dead man you ever seen? He won't be the last."

Tod shook his head. His eyes dropped to Blade's body. "Is he—is he dead?"

Chinker chuckled. "His head's solid bone. I had to hit him harder'n a steer to knock him out. He'll be in fine shape in a couple o' hours."

Tod's eyes returned to Gusty's discolored, swollen face, and he shuddered. "I—I didn't think—"

"What the hell did you think we'd do with Talbot's spy?" Chinker's smile died. "Snap out of it, you punk. We don't want no snivelin' kids mixed up in this." He grinned suddenly. "Jist start thinkin' about how soon you're goin' to be boss o' the Dome."

The boy licked his dry lips. "Blade—you're—you're going to kill him?"

"What do you think?" Then Chinker read the closeness of complete, paralyzing terror in the youth, and shied away quickly. "But not here. An' you ain't goin' to see it. Talbot an' Gusty went to a helluva lot o' trouble fixin' things to look like they'd had a fallin' out. Even to Gusty stealin' Dome cows. So we'll jist leave Gusty a-swingin' here an' cart Talbot off. You get the picture? It looks like Gusty an' Blade finally met and Talbot finished Boone off the same as any other lowdown rustler he'd catch. Come spring, we'll let it be known that some of Gusty's pals down in the brakes caught Mister Blade Talbot an' squared accounts. Nice an' simple. An' Tod Breen's the boss o' the High Dome."

He was watching the youthful face in the shadowy firelight. "That strike you right?"

"I—I guess so." Tod turned nervously away. "As—as long as nothin' goes wrong."

"Nothin' will. That's my end o' it." Chinker moved to the window, stared out.

"It's colder'n hell but it's clearin'. Think you can make it back to the Dome tonight?"

"Sure." Tod shifted his feet nervously. "I better get goin'."

The outlaw let him go. After the door slammed behind Tod, he moved to the window, waited until the boy got his horse from the pines behind the shack where they had hidden them, and watched him ride down the barren wind-swept ridge. The night was clear, the moon bright, the snow a soft white blanket on the ground, blurring the harsh details of the land. Then Chinker moved back to the fallen Talbot, bent to lash his wrists together behind his back with a rawhide thong, then moved off to the bunk against the far wall. He rolled a cigarette, and smoked it in silence. He stirred once to place more logs on the fire, then returned to the bunk.

Blade came around slowly. At first he was aware of nothing but a solid wall of blackness, then it was split, crumbled, by black lightning, and pain struck at him. He groaned, tried to turn, found he could not. Slowly a redness seemed to beat through his closed eyelids, and he opened them. The fire was a raging mass of flame, enormous, threatening, and he shrank back; then slowly realization came, and he relaxed.

He lay very still for minutes on end summoning his inner reserve of strength. He kept silent, closed his eyes and kept them closed. He felt his bonds, put his shoulder muscles to them, found no give, and relaxed. But the slight movement had been enough to warn his captor.

"All right, Talbot, you can stop playing 'possum," Chinker said. "It won't get you no place."

The outlaw came off the bunk. He was grinning as he lifted Blade's shoulders, propped him up against the leg of the heavy table. He squatted down before him.

"I've wanted this a long time now," he said. "More than anything else I've wanted it like this. Just you an' me."

Blade blinked his eyes. His head was still foggy, with shreds of blackness weaving his thoughts into a tangled mass. "All by yourself, Chinker? I didn't think you had the guts."

The outlaw whipped his open hand across Talbot's lips. "Don't make nasty cracks, Talbot, you'll live longer. Not much, maybe, but a little. For all I care, I'd just as leave plant you here."

Blade remained silent, but his mind settled slowly. Chinker planned to take him away from the cabin—He saw the stiff, dangling shape to one side of the fireplace, and the whole thing became evident. The blame for Gusty's death would fall on him, and Boone would be branded forever as a rustler who had been given his just deserts. It came bitterly, gnawing at him, and Blade struggled to keep down the blinding red wave of anger that threatened to engulf him. He wanted to taunt Chinker, force him to strike—but that wasn't the way the game was played. He shook his head slowly.

"I'm going to kill you, Chinker," he said evenly. "I don't know how but I'll get you."

Chinker laughed. "Listen to the wind whistle, Talbot. That's all it is, just wind."

He moved away, dropped onto the bunk, lay back at ease. Blade watched him for a minute, then dizzying pain shot through his battered head, and he closed his eyes, breathing hard. Gusty! Self-accusation rang through him, and he could not force it away. He had killed the man he had always called his best friend. There it was, and nothing could hide it. Slowly his mouth tightened into a straight, grim line, and his own glowing hate for Chinker lent him strength.

STIFFNESS settled into Blade's legs, cramped his arms where they were pulled behind his back. His head sank onto his chest, and his mind went into a gray blankness, where not even his driving hatred for the man in the cabin with him could penetrate. He came to suddenly, aware of a sharp coldness rising through him. The cabin was a dull gray, and the fire had burned low, only a few black-clouded embers remained. He heard a raucous snore, and twisted his head to see Chinker asleep on the bunk. It was an hour before dawn, the false-light just beginning to burn away the night.

With an effort that brought beads of sweat to his brow he tried to move his cramp-frozen arms. Pain made him reel dizzily, but he managed it at last, felt his fingers move, and tried the harder. He

brought the leather thong against the leg of the table, forced his arms straight, then pulled them up his back as far as he could; a matter of but a few inches at best, and he could bring little pressure to bear on the leather strands that bound him. But he worked methodically, patiently, feeling the growing warmth of the friction against the rough wood of the table. The skin of one wrist was rubbed, too, and he felt it blister then break, but kept on, gritting his teeth. The true dawn sent red fire into the east as he felt the bonds give a fraction of an inch, and tried to bring more pressure to bear.

But the unevenly balanced table moved; the crude legs ripped across the wooden floor with a groan of protest as it shifted to his weight, and he fell to one side sprawling as Chinker leaped from the bunk, gun in hand. His wild eyes fixed on Blade, and for a moment the rancher read death in them; then Chinker relaxed, stalked forward, gun extended. He bent, examined the rawhide thongs, grinned.

"Smart trick, Talbot, but it didn't work. You won't get a chance to try it again. We're ridin' out of here within an hour." He tested the bonds, ran an extra tie about Blade's wrists, drawing them painfully up his back in the process. Then he moved to the fire, built it up and returned to the bunk.

An hour after dawn they were on their way. Chinker maintained a sullen silence, and showed no gentleness in boosting Blade to the saddle. He didn't untie his hands, and took the reins of Talbot's buckskin. He swung up on his own mount, and urged the two animals down the ridgeline.

The day was dull, a leaden film over the blue of the sky, the sun a tiny red ball swimming in gray nothingness overhead. The Tallows stood boldly up, mantled with white, streaked with black and grays, the sage and pines almost lost under the blanket of snow. But the ridgeline remained clear saving for drifts, and they avoided these. An hour's ride brought them facing the main body of the brakes, and Chinker rode down off the ridge with some purpose evident. The trail was badly drifted, and the horses had to struggle to get through; but as they sank deeper into the raw gorges of the brakes, the snow thinned, and the going was easier.

This broken, jumbled land was unfamiliar to Blade; he had ridden into the brakes after strays, had staged roundups close to the edge; but he had never ridden this far into them before. Twice Chinker lost his way, came into a blind alley, and had to work his way back; but for the most part he kept to what had evidently been worked out as the closest approximation of a trail through the labyrinthine passages. Within an hour Talbot was hopelessly lost. While he had no doubt he could find his way out by keeping to the upper edges until he struck the ridge that rimmed the Tallows, he could make no accurate guess as to their destination.

They broke out into the valley abruptly, surprising Blade. He had never even heard of such a place, and the ideal suitability of it as a rustlers' roost struck him. It was some two miles at its broadest, tapering off to the south where the abrupt cleavage of the canyon walls began once more. On the shelving benchland to the west, where timber struck back to the canyons, a cabin had been built, supplemented now by rude huts of mud-wattled sides and canvas tops. Living trees formed the uprights of a large corral, with cut timbers lashed to them for bars. A score or more of horses were turned out there, and hay littered the broken, trampled snow. A horse stood, ears pricked forward, and whinnied, a door slammed, and a man's shouts came clearly to them.

"How do you like it, Talbot?" Chinker spat to one side. "Take a good look, you'll never have another chance."

They rode in, and men stepped out to meet them. Men he had seen in Tall Pine, others he knew only by repute, and none of it good. As fine a nest of renegades as the West had ever seen. Blade forced his face to impassivity, then started as he saw a familiar figure standing to one side, watching him. Nate Chantelle was staring at him, then looked sharply at the grinning Chinker, and strode forward.

"What's the play, Kaye?" he demanded.

The outlaw let his grin slide away. "Nothin' that concerns you, Nate. Just a little business with the tall man hisself. Brought him in for the boys to get a good look at him." He jerked on the reins of Blade's horse, brought the animal up be-

side him. His face went ugly. "Figger maybe the boys'd like to hold a kangaroo court o' their own an' hang this ranny proper!"

A man laughed coarsely. "Sounds good to me!" he grunted. "I allus hated Talbot's guts. I'll pull on the rope, fer one!"

Loud guffaws rang out. Chinker grinned triumphantly at Chantelle. "There, you see? You got any objections?"

Nate studied the outlaw for a full minute, then looked at the others. "Sure you know what you're doin', Chinker?"

"Aw, hell, Nate," a man put in. "Maybe hangin' this ranny will show them damn' ranchers we mean business. I don't reckon we're goin' to like your sidin' with Talbot this way."

Chantelle shrugged. "It's your business," he said finally, and returned to the cabin.

The prisoner was pulled from his horse, hustled into a slab-sided canvas-roofed hutch. A pot-bellied stove sat in one corner, its sides glowing red. The heat burst into Blade's face, and he winced from the pain of it on his snow-bitten face. The man who shoved him inside paused long enough to slice through the rawhide cords with a knife, then shoved him towards a bunk set against one frame wall. Stumbling, Blade fell across the slat-bottomed bed, unaware of the hardness of it. His arms ached from wrists to shoulder, sending agony through him, and his head throbbed and pounded. He dragged himself into the bunk, and collapsed, asleep before he could even straighten out.

A COLD wind, whistling through the unchinked wall awakened him. The tent-topped hut was dark. It was cold, but most of the wind was stopped. He stood up slowly, groaning with every movement as he edged toward the stove. A low fire twinkled behind the isinglass opening of the door. A bucket of peacoal stood handy. He bent to open the grate, tossed in a few handfuls. The stove smoked wickedly, sending him back coughing, then the coal caught, and warmth eased back into the cabin. He heard a triangle being banged, and men's voices. He crossed to the door of the cabin, but it was closed, a heavy bar holding it firmly in place. He shrugged and returned to the bunk.

He worked his hands and arms slowly, carefully, until most of the pain went out of them. His fingers were slightly frost-bitten, and swollen from the pressure of the cords about wrists, but his head was clearing. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and was smoking it when a man came up to the door and removed the bar. The door swung open and cold wind whined its way inside. Then the door slammed; and the visitor held up a lantern he carried in one hand. He set it down on the low handmade table that sat in the middle of the tiny room. It was Nate Chantelle. He nodded, then placed a hand over his lips. Blade caught the warning.

"You're in a hell of a fix, Blade," Chantelle said, loud enough for anyone listening outside to hear the words distinctly. "Nothin' I can do for you."

"I didn't expect anything, Nate," Blade returned. "We're on opposite sides of the fence."

"Yeah, glad to see you realize it. I'd hate to think of you cashin' in your chips thinkin' mean of me."

"I won't, Nate."

Chantelle moved back towards the door, held up both hands before him, shook hands with himself and grinned. His voice held the same flatly level tone, however, and he spoke loudly. "There'll be some chow for you later. One of the boys will bring it in. We're throwin' a sort o' shindig tonight—they'll get around to you tomorrow. I'm tellin' you now it ain't goin' to do you no good to try anythin'." Silently he formed the additional word "tonight" with his lips. Blade caught the meaning; he was to try nothing tonight.

"To put it plain, Blade, the easier you take it the easier it's goin' to be. Chinker ain't foolin', an' he can be damned mean when he's riled. It's better to die quick an' easy than to have some blood-crazy ranny stretchin' it out. You get me?"

"Yes," Blade answered. He cocked his eyebrows at Nate, and the outlaw formed one more word with his lips, silently, "Tomorrow." Then he nodded again, and went out, leaving the lantern behind him, and dropping the bar into place.

A half hour later a man brought food and coffee, waited while Blade ate in silence, then took the lantern with him when he

left. Blade smoked one cigarette. Then he lay back, drew the single grimy blanket of the bunk over him, and dropped into sleep.

When he awoke, the sun was beating against the tent-roof of the hut, and there was a thin warmth to it, not enough to drive away the chill of the night. Blade took care to build the fire in the stove, stood close beside it until the warmth drove him back.

He felt better; his head was clear, his body aching but not too painfully. He built a cigarette, and when the same man who had brought his supper showed up with a plate of bacon and eggs and a pot of coffee, he fell to heartily. He finished, and the man, still without speaking, left him alone. Hours passed. He heard the outlaw camp come to life; the bellow of cattle, the neigh of horses, movement of men and animals in the valley, once a loud altercation. But Nate did not show up, and the thin assurance Blade had felt died away.

Just before noon they came for him. Remembering Nate's warning of the night before, he made no resistance. Two men brought him out into the clearing between the cabins. Most of the others were gathered about. He saw Chinker Kaye, his face marred by shadows and unshaven, leering at him drunkenly, and then the outlaw swung in close, and struck him across the face. The two beside him grabbed his arms before he could strike back.

"Yo're gonna hang, damn you!" Chinker blazed. "We done tried you this mornin' an' found you guilty as hell!" His drunken laughter rang out. "Ain't that somethin'? We're goin' to hang Mister Tall Man Talbot hisself—hang him as high as a kite kin fly!"

"Aw, shut up, Chinker!" a man protested. "It's bad enough without you makin' it any worse."

They moved as a body toward the blunt outline of a barn set amid the pines behind the main cabin. Horses stood there. More men clustered about. On one horse was Nate Chantelle, his face grim, his gray eyes cold as the mountain snow.

"Let's get this over with, damn it!" he called out. "One of you men get him on a horse. Use his own. I'll tie his wrists behind him."

From the pulley placed in the angle of the barn roof to hoist hay into the upper loft, a rope dangled down. One end had been tied to a projecting beam beside the double doors, the hayhook had been removed from the other, and a very creditable imitation of a hangman's noose substituted for it. Nate rode beside it, looming large against the gray sky. It brushed his shoulder, and he didn't even glance at it, staring at Blade.

Was it a trick of Nate's to keep him quiet during the night, his silent promise of help? Cold chills went up Blade's back, then he fought them down. In either case it was too late to do anything about it. He suffered himself to be boosted into the saddle. The man holding the reins of the animal looped them over the saddlehorn, then led the horse directly under the dangling noose. Nate urged his horse close beside him. He held a buckskin thong in one hand, reached out to take Blade's arm with the other. As he bent close, his voice hissed, almost silently, in Blade's ear.

"Here's yore chance!"

Then Chantelle cursed, fumbled the thong, dropped it. He bent over on the side away from Blade to retrieve it. Someone yelled: *"Look out!"*

Chantelle's movement thrust his right hip up. His gun was within easy reach of Blade's hand. His heart pounding crazily, Blade grasped the handle of the gun, felt it slide freely into his hand—then shots roared about him as he dug in his spurs, felt his horse spring wildly away.

X

EVEN as his horse broke away in surging leaps and bounds, Blade Talbot's eyes were searching for Chinker Kaye. He saw the outlaw turning to run. Blade's gun roared. He saw the killer stumble, fall heavily. He had time for nothing more.

The outlaw camp broke into chaotic movement. Men ran to either side, pulling guns, stumbling in their haste. Behind him he saw Chantelle grinning encouragement even as he allowed his horse to rear wildly, and scatter the outlaws still further.

"Head him off, dammit!" Nate was yelling, and yet made no move to do so himself.

Blade dug his spurs home, felt his ani-

mal's long-muscled legs bow and strain, then the camp was behind him, and the horse was heading for the canyon mouths that opened hungrily before him. Behind him guns barked. He bent low across his horse's neck and whispered encouragement into the ears of the running beast. The horse responded to the urging, sure-footed, angling sharply to the persuasive tug of the reins in Blade's practiced grip. Bullets chocked into the ground, whined from rocks; then the horse screeched, and Blade nearly fell as his mount redoubled his efforts. Glancing down, he saw where a bullet had cut the smooth skin across one hard-muscled hip; but it had done no serious damage, and the bleeding was slight. The badly frightened animal was bolting now, though, and Blade made no effort to slow his headlong pace.

Into the rocky mouth of the first canyon passage they plunged, and for a brief instant the sound of their passage thundered from the stony walls. Deeper the horse plummeted, bending to the increasing slope, but not slowing. A spattering of gunfire rang out behind them, then silence closed in, broken only by the echoing hoofs against shale rock.

The canyon walls narrowed perceptibly as he rode deeper; the steeper cliffs sheering upwards forty, sixty, a hundred feet, until the rocky precipice to either side cut out the light of the sun. And still he urged the horse on, pausing twice to breathe the animal, but each time hastening on again. At one point the walls narrowed to no more than the span of a man's arms, and a growing worry assailed Blade it was a blind passage. But then he struck a second cut that edged sharply away to the right, and reined in. At the moment he had plunged into the canyon, he had been headed west; despite meanderings, the direction had held steady. The right fork of the canyon would bear toward the ridge and the Dome.

Behind him hoofs thundered and he heard men's angry cries. With no further delay, he turned his horse into the right hand passage and dug in his spurs. The walls closed in about him, and a sharp turn cut off the light from the broader canyon. He was unseen, some four hundred yards from the branching canyons. He reined in, rubbing his animal's neck. The muscles beneath his legs were quivering, and the sides of the animal were heaving, but not alarmingly so as yet. He nodded with satisfaction, then drew a deep breath and held it as he heard the ring of shod hoofs in the canyon beyond.

"Hell, it forks here!" a man's voice yelled stridently. "He's got away."

"Like hell he has!" a second voice cut in. Chinker's voice! "Split up, damn you! Get a move on. It's our necks if he gets away. Talbot will see every man here hung if he isn't caught!"

Blade put his horse to a run.

The canyon broadened, then narrowed by turn; doubling in upon itself, and yet there had been no major junction with another passage he might turn into. He cursed his luck and pushed the horse on. An hour's hard riding had taken the edge from the animal.

Rounding a sharp bend the canyon forked abruptly, one branch turning sharply left. As Blade reined in he heard his pursuers, and hastened to put his horse to the new fork. He rode some hundreds of yards, rounded a turn, and nearly plummeted head-on into Chinker's men. There were five or six of them and as they saw him, a yell went up. One opened fire. Blade wheeled his horse, and for an instant had the sickening feeling the animal would fall, then pounding hoofs surged free, and they were away, racing back the way they had come.

Panic nibbled at Blade's mind, but he fought it back. There was a chance, slim though it was, that he could make it back to the forked canyon before the second group reached it. A chance that died a-borning as he heard a yell from ahead and pulled up his racing mount.

The walls to either side were sharply cut, but talus strewed one slope from a rockfall. He hesitated but a moment, then put his horse to the dangerous slope. The animal hit the rubble at a run, stumbled, slid, then surged up. Behind him a man's yells echoed and rang, and dirt flew into his face as a rifle chewed at the rocky wall of the canyon.

For a moment it was touch and go. He expected to be hit before he could clear the summit some forty feet above him. But

the plunging, awkward gait of the horse, combined with the fact a rising target is the hardest to hit, saved him. He turned once to fire back, then held his shots as he remembered he had only the five shells in the chambers of the gun he had taken from Chantelle. Directly behind him the outlaws were putting their horses to the rockslide. The man in the lead was light, and riding hard. He was gaining until his horse struck a soft, yielding mass, and as the rock gave way, went down with a thundering crash. Below the falling outlaw a man screamed, tried to drive his horse out of the way, but too late. Once started, the trembling rock area gave way swiftly, and men and horses went down. Dust roiled up, and in the confusion, Blade's mount cleared the fallen mass at the top, and again on comparatively level ground, broke into a run.

THE low mesa Blade found himself on stretched north a good half mile or more before dropping abruptly into a canyon once more. The summit was too low-lying to give him a vantage point, as sharper rises intervened between him and the ridge. But he had his bearings once again, and reaching the farthest edge of the sharp-edged bluff, reined in to breathe his horse. The uproar behind him had died away, and as yet no pursuer had topped the rise behind him. He took advantage of this pause to inspect his horse. The rifle shot had grooved the right hip, but a thin crust was already hardening over it, and there had been little bleeding. The animal was breathing hard, but the alert head was still up, and the horse swung about to look back at him. He stroked the quivering withers with one hand.

"Good horse," he whispered. "They'll break their hearts before they run us down!"

He dismounted, and on foot moved to the edge of the mesa. The descent was steep, but not impassable. For a moment he knelt there, peering down, then a horseman came in sight down the canyon, and he drew back as a yell peeled out.

"Here he is!"

A gun barked sharply, and dirt flew from the ridge. Blade scrambled back and swung up into the saddle. He eased the horse into a gallop, swinging sharply left for the far rim. The mesa broke here, swung down into a short gully, then rose sharply back and angled off south. He made the dip before the first raiders topped the rise, and edged the horse along it. It plunged abruptly, and the animal took the descent at a running scramble, forelegs braced to take the shock. As they struck the canyon floor, Blade felt the horse stumble, threw himself clear. He fell cleanly, saw the horse tumble, fall, then scramble back up. He ran, made the mount flying, and an instant later the horse was in full run.

Rifles blasted behind him, but he hugged the canyon wall, made a fast turn, and was clear. The horse was running free, but even as Blade felt a surge of relief, the animal he bestrode stumbled, broke stride. The fall had injured a leg. With urging the animal resumed a run, favoring the right foreleg. But Blade had gained a lead; how far he could not judge, but it would take Chinker and his men time to work their way down to him, for they could not take the gamble he had taken.

For an hour the horse held the pace, but it was failing. Long shadows filled the gorges, but it would be hours before full night. The canyon he had been following broke suddenly, forking twice. The second passage to his right seemed to bear straight away toward the ridgeline, and he chose it without hesitation. There was no sound of pursuit behind him, but he knew they were following, and fast.

Then, with appalling suddenness, three things happened: As he rounded a narrow passage where the canyon bent in upon itself, he rode full into a broad cul-de-sac; the canyon passage ended in a wide, rock-girt valley from which there was no exit, and no rock-slide leading up, only precipitate walls that shot up with startling suddenness. His horse stumbled, the foreleg giving way entirely, and Blade threw himself clear as the animal went down. He fell heavily, half-stunned and at the same instant, from the canyon behind him, came the wildly triumphant cries of his pursuers.

XI

FOR Maudilene Sanner, the winter had proven harder than any other she could remember. Something had changed the

Dome for the worse; she could see it in so many things, the fight between Blade and Gusty Boone, Tod's strange manner of late, and the obvious tension engendered by the formation of the Regulators and Virgie Thompson's persistence in trying to get Blade to join the organization. To add to this was Blade's unexplained disappearance for two days and nights; it wasn't like him to be gone for so long a time without some explanation to her. She shook her head and stared out the big central window of the ranchhouse at the desolate, wind-swept plain that sloped down to the towering height of the Dome.

In the ranchyard a man moved towards the house, and she recognized Tod. For two days he had not spoken, had not appeared for meals, and the unsteadiness of his gait assured her he had spent the time in drunkenness. But he was not drunk when he came into the house. He removed his heavy coat, moved over to the fireplace, held out thin, trembling hands. She watched him in silence, and felt a shock when he turned to stare fixedly at her. His face had changed; the soft boyishness had hardened, grooving lines beside his full-lipped mouth, and his air of sullenness seemed intensified. His eyes were dark-shadowed and red-veined, and she guessed he hadn't slept in two nights. Yet she felt no stir of sympathy; the change in Tod destroyed what feeling she had ever felt for him.

"Things are goin' to be different," he mumbled, then closed his mouth with a snap, almost as if he had meant it as a warning.

She got up slowly to face him. "What is it, Tod? What are you trying to say?"

"Nothin'!" he retorted, and spun about to glower into the fire.

She came closer. "What's wrong, Tod? You're not acting right—"

"None of your damned business!" he yelled. He twisted about, his face ugly. For a crazy instant she was almost afraid of him. Then she laughed full in his face.

"You've never changed, Tod, not one whit! You're still the spoiled child, pouting because everything doesn't work out your way."

His hand slapped hard across her face. "Don't talk like that to me, damn you!"

But the words had no more than left his lips when her balled fist struck him heavily. She struck out as a man would hit. The force of her blow drove him back. She was breathing hard, her eyes narrowed.

"If you ever strike me again, Tod Breen, I'll kill you."

He stood swaying before her; the long period of drinking just over had weakened him, and he blinked uncertainly at her, as if trying to focus his eyes. "You'll pay for that," he said. "By heck, you'll pay for that."

Abruptly her anger, her fear of him, was gone, and she laughed again. "You're afraid even of me, Tod Breen! Afraid I'll tell Blade. Afraid of what he'll do to you—"

He straightened, peering at her uncertainly, then laughed, a high-pitched, crazy sound. "Go ahead and tell him! All my life you've scared me by saying you'd tell Blade on me. Only I'm not scared any more. To hell with Blade Talbot. And to hell with you too!"

He half-ran from the room. She heard the door to his room slam shut, and still she stood there, staring after him. What had happened to him? What had gone wrong these last years he had grown up? They had always wrangled, he had always seemed to resent her, hate her in a way, but never like this. And, aware of Blade's hope she would marry Tod some day, she had held her own feelings repressed, given him every benefit of the doubt. But now—

There seemed no answer to her problem. The whole world seemed turned upside down—her world, at least. Gusty Boone gone, Blade missing for two days. It was instinctive with her not to cry, and yet she felt the need of tears more than ever before in her life. It was as if the very walls of her existence, that she counted on to support the whole structure of her beliefs, was crumbling away. Only the tall, strong figure of Blade remained unchanged.

At that moment a man's harsh cry peeled out, and she sprang to her feet. In the yard before the house two men had reined in, a heavily-burdened third horse being led behind them. She saw Charley Prentiss, his long face set like graven rock, and her heart jumped into her throat. That still, stiff figure across the saddle of the extra horse—

"Blade!" she cried out, and flew toward the door. But Charley was there first, and caught her, held her back.

"Don't go out there, Miss Maudie," he said, tersely. "It's Gusty Boone. He's daid."

Relief filled her, then as swiftly faded with the shock. Gusty—dead! She reeled, caught herself.

"I—I'll be all right, Charley. What happened?"

The foreman stepped back. "Damned if I know. Me an' Luke rode up to the line cabin on the ridge this mornin'. There was Gusty hangin' from the rafters. Reckon it was meant to look like him an' Blade had settled differences the hard way, with Gusty gettin' the short end o' the deal—but we found this." He held up a calfskin notebook that she recognized as Blade's.

"Shore'n hell he didn't leave it there, an' he didn't lose it accidental-like. Reckon the whole thing makes sense. Blade an' Gusty staged their blow-up, an' Gusty was down in the brakes. They was to meet at the line cabin, only them rustlers got wise to Gusty's game—an' Blade walked right in on them." He shook his head. "Don't look good for Blade, but the boss ain't no tinhorn, an' we didn't find no blood, so it's likely they took him with them. I'm gittin' the boys together now. This job's been put off too damn long now."

A step sounded behind her, and she saw Tod, standing there, staring at Charley Prentiss as if he had never seen him before.

"Wait—I'm going with you!" she flashed. She looked at Tod. The boy's face flushed.

"Reckon somebody's got to look after the Dome," he said. "I'll stay here."

Contempt for Tod filled her. She ran swiftly to her room to dress.

Two hours' hard riding brought them to the line cabin, and there it was decided they would follow the ridge line east toward the Tallows Brakes.

"Will we be in time, Charley?" she asked.

"I don't know about savin' the boss, Miss," the foreman replied. "But shore'n hell we'll be in time to do some hangin'!"

He had no more than spoken when from the broken range below them, and to the south, there came the distant sound of gunfire.

"Come on!" the girl shouted, and dug in her spurs.

AS HIS horse went down Blade rolled free. His eyes swung in a single circling glance, measuring the distance and his chances before his pursuers broke through the entrance to the box canyon. He headed for a single break in the towering walls close beside the entrance to the canyon. At that point the ridgeline was lower, and the precipitous slope was not as sharply defined as the rest.

The sound of pursuit rang out from the echoing walls, intensified, brought much nearer than it really was. He had stumbled into a trap familiar to Chinker Kaye and his men, for their shouts pealed out again. The broken ground made running hard, and he stumbled, fell heavily twice before he gained the rocky wall. For a moment he paused in confusion, for erosion had swept the base of the passage clean, a straight wall of rock some eight feet in height before the first indentation of the rockfall of ages past. He hesitated while behind him the sound of pursuit grew louder, clearer, then as the first rider broke through the passage, he sprang back, then forward once more, throwing himself upwards.

His scrambling feet and hands found no purchase for a moment, and he fell back; then his groping right hand caught the widespread roots of sage brush, and a moment later he swung his legs up, caught the edge of the rocky wall, and was over. He pressed inward, panting for breath, and the first riders surged through the pass behind him, not six feet away.

The horses were running, and the riders searched the box canyon for their quarry—and in that moment he surged upward again, fighting for hand holds, moving swiftly before each crumbling hold could give way. Eight feet, ten feet, twenty—then a rifle barked, and his left leg went numb. He was jerked to one side by the impact of the slug. That saved his life, for the next three shots ripped dirt and rock from where his body had been a split second before.

"He's trying the cliff!" Chinker Kaye bellowed. Horses milled below, and dust roiled up, obscuring him, blinding them. In the momentary confusion Blade got his crippled

left leg under him, found he could trust it to hold his weight but a moment at a time, but even so could progress crab-like, sideways, up the face of the rockslide. There was little shelter this far down, but another twenty feet there were exposed boulder faces beneath which he might stand off an army—if he had ammunition enough. He made the first of these, and fell behind it, exhausted. For a moment there were no more shots. Then a rifle barked, and the slug ripped a white chip from the boulder face, hurled it away. The echoing screech of the ricocheting bullet was deafening.

"Come on down, Talbot!" Chinker yelled. "You ain't got a chance."

Blade sucked air into his tortured lungs, then cautiously moved, keeping the shape of the boulder between him and the men below while he sought for a second refuge higher up. He found it some twenty feet up and to his right. And with twenty feet of bare space to cover, he'd be dead ten times over before he could make it. His lips tightened, then loosened in a grin.

"I like it up here, Chinker!" he yelled. "Think I'll stay the rest o' the winter unless you figger you'd like to come after me?"

The reply was a furious emptying of a rifle; a futile gesture as the shots merely chipped the boulder. As the rifle ceased, Blade came up. For a short instant he had the men below in clear sight, some dismounted in the saddle, all staring up, guns at the ready. He tried to pick out Chinker, but failed to in the time he had. He raised his revolver, fired twice. A man on horseback threw his hands over his head, fell backwards over his horse. Instantly the others spurred apart. Blade was moving even as they split apart. He made the second boulder, and crouched there, before they fired again. But he was beyond their reach for the moment, and there was more cover behind him as the sharpness of the slope decreased towards the summit.

There had been five shots in Nate Chantelle's gun when he had seized it; he had two left. He bent low to peer around the rock. He drew back as a gun blazed, had time only to see that the men below him had scattered along the canyon wall, were pressed in close, out of his line of fire.

They would draw their horses back into the mouth of the canyon passage, leave a man there to guard them, and then proceed to scale the first high barrier of the cliff, and come after him. The rocks that protected him would also protect them from him. And afoot, with an injured left leg, he could never scale the rocky cliff before they came up to him.

He searched the face of the rockfall. It was a land slip, sheared sharply off at the base. It angled back sharply as it climbed. The going would be easier near the summit. There was a second cleaved fault another ten feet above him, a sort of rock shelf that ran across the face of the cliff to the sharper edge of the canyon beyond. He hesitated but a moment, then clambered to his feet, and leaped upward, onto the shelving layer of rock.

HIS left leg ached but he forced himself to keep going. He fell once, caught himself only at the edge of the shelf, and drew back instantly, breathing hard, as he saw the back of a man, flattened against the rock, staring off to his left, where Blade had last been seen. For a moment Blade debated risking a shot to bring the man down, then decided against it, and moved on, pressing back as tight as he could against the slope.

At a laborious run he reached the ending of the shelf. It met the canyon wall where it stood out from the rockfall. And it continued on, a narrow ledge not over a foot wide at best, on into the mouth of the canyon passage beyond. Blade faced the sheer rock wall, swung out and over. For an instant he had to trust his injured left leg to hold his weight, and even as it gave way, his right foot found the ledge, and he was safe, pressed tight against the rock wall, breathing hard. Slowly then, left foot first, he edged on around the curve of the passage. Here the wall was perpendicular, shooting straight up a good hundred feet, as sheer as the face of a brick building. Below him, some forty feet, was the rock-strewn floor of the canyon. He had no choice but to go on.

Then, as abruptly as it began, the ledge on which he moved ended, sinking down and into the cliff itself. For a moment

panic struck at him, for he searched the cliff beyond without finding where it renewed. Then below him, some five feet, he saw where some rupture of the rock in past ages had dropped it. It began anew, and ran on into the canyon, widening as it went. Once again it meant using his injured leg, but there was no alternative, for he heard the cursing hunters beyond growing bolder as they failed to find him. In a matter of moments they would move out into the valley to scan the heights—and he would be a perfect target for a rifle-shot.

He eased his body over the ledge, caught the edge with his hands, swung there. The new run of the ledge began some three feet to his left, and five feet below him. From where he dangled, he could not see it; for a moment he swung there, then swinging as far left as he could, he let go with his hands. There was an instant of sickening free fall before his left foot caught. Pain shot up his injured leg. It buckled beneath him. For an instant he tottered on the edge of the cliff, with nothing but broken rock below him, then he fell inward. His right foot found purchase. He was safe.

He moved on hurriedly as behind him the sounds of pursuit were growing louder as they came his way. The edge sloped sharply down here, and it was broad enough to permit him to run normally. Where it narrowed and began to climb once more, he fell face down. There below him stood the horses of Chinker Kaye's band of outlaws, and the lone man left to guard them.

For a moment Blade lay there panting, afraid he had been seen, but when he dared lift his head once more, he saw the outlaw staring curiously out towards the narrow opening of the canyon passage, his rifle held carelessly in his arms. Blade raised himself to his knees, then to his feet. For an instant he poised there, the guard twenty feet below him, almost directly in his path. With a wild lunge he catapulted himself from the ledge directly at the man.

The force of his fall tore the man from the saddle before he could yell, drove the air from Blade's lungs. Together they struck the ground. For an instant Blade could only lie there, dazed, unable to move; but the outlaw was out cold.

A wild cry from the valley drove Blade to his feet. He blundered into the side of a horse that tried to shy away. Then his groping fingers caught the reins, and with his last strength he drew himself up. The horse was running even as he gained the saddle, and for one long minute he had to fight with all his strength to stay there.

Behind him men spilled into the canyon, seizing horses, mounting. Blade made distance grow between him and them. His left leg had gone entirely numb, and he felt a growing nausea in the pit of his stomach, a sure sign of loss of blood. He removed his bandana, got it around his leg, then using his gun barrel as a lever, twisted it tighter and tighter.

Guns barked and thundered behind him, and he pressed low. He could feel nothing from his waist down. He tried to tighten the makeshift tourniquet, but could not; the gun slipped from his bloody fingers, fell to the ground and was lost.

The day seemed to slip into a pall of gray nothingness, and the urgency that had driven him receded. He found himself wondering from whom he was fleeing, and why, and brought himself to with a shock. The horse, allowed to choose its own way, was working out of the brakes. Somewhere in the past minutes the pursuit had been lost. He heard only the drumming of his horse's hoofs echoing back from the rock walls about him; then even that was lost as the animal picked its way up a sharp slope. Blade had sunken into a gray lethargy and roused only as he caught shouts behind him, then the angry snap of guns. He tried to sit erect, to dig in his spurs, but his legs would not obey him. His left leg seemed to be frozen, immersed in wetness from the thigh down.

Then his jaded horse topped the final rise to the ridge. Vaguely he saw horsemen spurring towards him. A voice reached his ears.

"It's Blade!"

He could hold on no more, felt himself falling, but did not feel the hard ground as he struck. The thick gray pall closed in tighter, then soft arms were about his shoulders, and a girl's face was close to his own, kissing his bruised and battered mouth.

For a moment he could allow no other thought, then guns sounded and he saw

Charley Prentiss bending low over him, his long face anxious, enraged at the same time.

"It's thet Chinker Kaye! Him an' his ootfit!" Charley said. "I'm goin' after them! We'll end this here an' now!"

Then Blade surged upright. "*No!*" The single word was intended to be a shout, but came out but a whisper. "That's an order, Charley. Gettin' Chinker is my job, an' I want to do it my own way."

XII

THE days grew longer, and the high snow on the Tallows began to recede upward, and the first green appeared.

Blade hobbled out to the small graveyard behind the ranchhouse to pause a few moments over Gusty's grave. There were fresh spring wildflowers on it, placed there by Maudie. He thought of the girl now, remembered her distraught face, the warmth of her kisses that day she and Charley Prentiss had found him on the ridge. For days after that he had been unaware of the passage of time, and when he once more found himself growing aware of his surroundings, everything had returned to the old footing. Even Tod had settled down a bit, stayed close to the Dome. Charley Prentiss had reported only nominal losses, the rustling having apparently settled into the pattern of watchful waiting, of growing expectancy.

A buckboard rolled into the ranchyard from the Buffalo Horn road. Blade moseyed up to the house.

Maudie came out and stood beside him, shielding her eyes from the sun. "It's Virgie Thompson and Beth," she said, and her voice was oddly flat.

He looked at her, but she was waving a greeting to the other girl, and smiling. Virgie climbed down.

"Damned if I ain't glad to see you so fit, Blade," he said. He glanced at his daughter, and his grin widened. "Reckon thet goes double for Beth."

Beth smiled. "I'm sorry we couldn't come sooner, Blade. Charley Prentiss rode in to say you were recovering."

"I am," he answered. "I hope you'll stay for dinner? Maudie, think we can rustle up enough chow to feed 'em?"

"I'm sure we can," Maudie answered. "Come along, Beth."

When the two girls left the porch, Virgie and Blade sat on the porch.

"Reckon I'm gettin' old, Blade. These long rides are killin' me. Looks like the Dome's prosperin'. Wish I could say as much for some others I know."

"Meaning yourself, Virgie?"

"Yep, although I ain't been the hardest hit. Stealin's bigger'n ever. Since the first thaw we've lost five hundred head. That ain't goin' to break me but it cain't go on forever." He shook his head. "Chayme Baxter claims his CB's the hardest hit of all. Keeps raisin' a ruckus every meetin' o' the Regulators. We've about stopped the immigration west of Tall Pine, but there's some amongst us ain't exactly pleased with how it's been done. Georgie Castlemon was shot at the other night; feller got clear away. Then more'n one line cabin's been raided an' burned. Like maybe somebody's fightin' fire with fire. I know fer a fact that Tall Pine's boomin'. They say Nate Chantelle's on his way to bein' the Rustler King of Wyoming. An' the way it looks, it'll be another ten years afore there's law in Wyoming, statehood or not. Don't mind tellin' you, Blade, me for one, I'm gettin' a bellyful."

"A range war ain't the answer, Virgie," Blade said quickly. "When it's time for a man to fight he's got to do it quick, and thorough. The brakes are going to have to be cleaned out."

"Now that's what I was hopin' to hear," Virgie said. "Between you an' me, I ain't satisfied with the way Chayme's been handlin' things. Hittin' here an' there, stirrin' the nesters up more'n any harm he's doin' them. They're strikin' back, an' more'n one of us is findin' it hard goin'. Some of the smaller ranchers is already in debt to Chayme. That's one thing in his favor—he's a ready man with a dollar when a feller needs it."

"Is he?" Blade's eyes closed to slits. He thought of Gusty Boone's words. . . . *Somebody else, off yonder, waitin' fer somethin' to break. No name, no nothin'*. . . . You can bet yore wad it ain't a nester—an' it ain't nobody ridin' the Trail. . . . Somebody behind the mass rustling, urging the Regulators on, stirring up trouble, ready for

something to break—what? Chayme Baxter, and his ready dollars. It made queer sense.

Thompson was watching him, almost eagerly. "I'd feel a mighty lot better about the whole deal, Blade, if I knew you was headin' it. How's about that?"

"Join your Regulators, you mean?" Blade shook his head. "I gave you my answer, and my reasons, Virgie. They ain't changed none. The Dome will take care of itself. When the time comes we'll do what has to be done, and it won't be to burn out a few nesters and call it a day."

Thompson shook his head. "You're a damned stubborn man, Blade. I jist hope you know what you're doin'."

Later that afternoon Beth Thompson found an opportunity to speak to Blade alone. He had unconsciously avoided her, and she knew it. Her eyes, for once, were serious, almost solemn.

"I started twice to ride over to you, Blade," she said. "But something stopped me. You know what it was? It was the fact you didn't need me, didn't want me. No woman can freely admit that, but it was true, and I knew it. It hasn't changed with you, has it?"

"I reckon not, Beth," he answered, slowly. Much to his relief, she nodded and walked away.

And when they had gone in the buckboard, Maudie came out to stand beside him, looking after them. "Beth loves you, Blade. I didn't think she had it in her to really love anyone until now."

"That's loco talk, Maudie. Just the same I'm obliged. Makes me feel like a pup again."

"Does it Blade?" She looked at him, her eyes unreadable. Then slowly she returned to the house, and he was alone on the porch.

IT WAS full night when Chayme Baxter rode into Tall Pine. He rode cautiously, taking care not to be seen, for the time had not yet arrived when he felt he could boldly ride into the outlaw town he owned. At the moment Chayme Baxter was well satisfied with himself and what he had accomplished. Not that his self-given task was completed, but he was well aware that the time for the final move had arrived. He grinned to himself as he urged his horse close to the back of Brant's place. He dismounted, stretched, and paused to light a cigar before walking to the side door that opened directly into Brant's private office. He opened the door without knocking and stepped inside. The door slammed behind him, and he frowned at the three men in the room.

Charley Brant sat before an open rolltop desk, his feet propped up before him, and he swung them down with an exclamation as Chayme came inside. Behind him, to one side of the door that opened onto the hall that ran to the front of the roadhouse sat Nate Chantelle. The gunman's chair was tilted back, and his expression did not change as he saw Baxter. He blew smoke in tiny circles. The third man was Chinker Kaye, and he sat spraddle-legged on a reversed chair, his chin resting on his arms where they were folded across the back of the chair.

"Howdy, boss," Brant said, and got up. He motioned towards his chair, and walked over to an extra straightback chair and sat down. Chayme moved slowly, heavily, eased his weight down carefully. The springs squeaked as he rocked the chair back and forth. For a moment he didn't speak, letting his eyes rest on his three lieutenants.

Then slowly he centered his attention on Chinker's beard-stubbled face. "You'll be glad to know your friend Talbot's ridin' again. I saw him on the range this mornin'. Didn't look much worse for wear."

"It wasn't me that let the lousy coyote loose," Chinker returned sullenly. He glared openly at Chantelle.

The gunfighter smiled through his smoke screen. "I didn't bring him into the hideout," he said. "I'll tell you once more, Chinker, keep your mouth shut about him gettin' away or I'll shut it for you."

For an instant hatred showed in Chinker's dull eyes, then they dropped before the gunman's cold stare.

Baxter looked from one to the other and nodded. "It's water over the dam." He frowned at his cigar, at the building white ash on the tip. "We got more important things to think about. But Talbot bein' up an' around enters into it. It ain't no secret what the Regulators do—they do what I tell them to. But Talbot ain't one of them.

That ain't the way I figured it was goin' to be, but—" He shrugged. "We can't wait much longer. Thompson's talking about a roundup the first of next month. He's sure Talbot will throw in with him an' the rest of them. We can't wait for that."

"We've waited too damned long now to suit me," Brant put in.

"Shore," Chinker put in quickly. "Only you ain't doin' the ridin' gettin' your pants froze to the damn' saddle! Weather's still bad. We'll have another blizzard afore we can count on spring bein' here."

"Not likely," Baxter said. "We'll chance it. How many men you got, Nate?"

Chantelle let the forelegs of his chair down to the floor. "Thirty. We got seven nesters in the brakes. They can drive a herd, but if there's trouble—" he shrugged.

"Ahuh!" Baxter looked at Brant. "How many of these homesteaders you got lined up, Brant?"

The saloon owner grimaced. "About twenty. Had three times that many a month ago but that was just talk. Twenty you can count on. How far, it depends."

"Fifty men," Chayme pursed his thick lips. "I counted on a hundred or more. But it'll have to do."

"Too many of 'em have got a bellyfull of the deal," Brant said. "They talk mean but when it comes to chancin' gettin' hung they just ain't around. You made a mistake thinkin' you could band nesters an' rustlers into a single group."

"Maybe I did, but it's worked well enough. Tall Pine's been open and we'll keep it that way. It won't take much longer. You know what to do, Nate, an' you, Chinker. Get your men ready tomorrow. Brant, get what settlers you can. Nate'll see there're enough horses to go around. Plan on movin' out day after tomorrow. Hit north, work east, then drive south as fast as you can. You can cross the ridge ten miles west of Talbot's line cabin. It'll be easy to drift them into the brakes. You can drive 'em as far as you can, then scatter them into the draws. You got that, Nate?"

"I got it." Chantelle stood up. He was rolling a new cigarette. "That's goin' to be one hell of a herd of cattle."

"The biggest Wyoming's ever seen," Chayme agreed. "But we can take our time workin' them out of the draws. We'll ship from Tall Pine, a hundred head at a time." He grinned. "You, Chinker you ride northeast, past the Dome, drive straight south. With two forks to the drive, any opposition you meet will be small."

"Gotcha," Chinker said sourly. "But what about them damned Regulators you been runnin' the hoofs off'n? Ain't they liable to start big trouble?"

"It doesn't matter how big the trouble is, Chinker, as long as it doesn't point your way. I'll see that it doesn't."

"Sounds real good," Chantelle volunteered. "Only both drives are going to cross the Dome. What about Talbot?"

"What about him?" Baxter grinned. "He's got a gimpy leg. He can't ride worth a damn, an' he ain't got enough men to buck both you an' Chinker at the same time. You'll drive right through him if he's crazy enough to try to stop you. An' Tod Breen's got his orders; Chinker's made sure of that, haven't you, Chinker?"

"Hell, yes! The kid'll come a-runnin' if Talbot makes a move."

Chantelle nodded. "Then it's settled. We start day after tomorrow. I'll be ready."

"Then you better get back to the brakes tonight," Chayme ordered. "Chinker, you stay here an' help Brant get these nesters lined up. You'll take most of them with you."

Nate Chantelle moved to the door, stood there a moment, glancing from one to the other. There was strange amusement in his eyes. "I got a hunch, Chinker," he said softly. "Blade won't try to stop you. But you'll be drivin' Dome cattle in that herd, an' five'll get you ten that Blade comes after them." He closed the door softly behind him even as Chinker Kaye cursed savagely.

"Damn his eyes! Allus talkin', talkin'! I'm gettin' sick of it, an' him, too."

"Do something about it, then," Baxter said. "But do it after we finish the drive."

Slowly Kaye smiled, then nodded.

"And, Chinker—" Chayme Baxter's eyes narrowed as he stared at the end of his cigar. "Talbot's main herd is east of the Dome. Clean him out. You get that?"

"Shore, boss, I get it!" Chinker laughed. Then sobered. "But Talbot'll come after us for shore."

"Let him," Baxter said. "He'll come alone, because I'll make damned certain the Regulators get a bellyfull when they strike at Tall Pine. These nesters might not be able to ride worth a damn but they'll fight when they're cornered. And when this drive's over it'll be Tall Pine the Regulators hit for, I'll see to that."

Brant grinned suddenly, and laughed. "We'll be ready for 'em!" he promised, savagely. "We'll be sittin' right here ready for 'em."

XIII

TROUBLE comes swiftly, and Blade Talbot found it no exception to the rule this morning when the outlaws struck west of the Tallows. For days the riders of the High Dome had been working the draws west of the towering Dome, driving cattle out for the summer graze, bunching them nearer water sources as a prelude to the Spring roundup. The green haze, dotted with the dark blotches of sage, spread down into the broad valley of the ranch, thickening as it neared water sites, spreading thin, with the harsh brown of earth visible where water was scarce.

Blade had ridden out that morning, his first ride alone, and found much of his strength had returned. His leg had healed, and the stiffness in the muscles were easing. None of the riders were at the ranch; the tasks were many and widespread. Maudie had driven into Buffalo Horn that morning, and Tod was out on the range. The cook had fixed a cold lunch, with lemonade in a pitcher, for the days were beginning to warm up, and thinly transparent heat waves danced over the range.

Blade saw the dust clouds to the west building higher and higher, and watched them, puzzled. Prentiss had said nothing about driving a herd towards the ridgeline, and yet the dust could mean nothing else. Twice he considered riding out, and twice he shook his head; Prentiss was a capable man, hard-riding, and if something were wrong, he would be acting first, and would ride in to discuss it later. The dust cloud was thinning, caught by a mountain wind, and dispersed across the limitless sky, when a rider came around the edge of the Dome.

Blade recognized the man as Billy Bishop long before he rode crazily into the ranchyard. The cook, a tall, thin laconic individual who gloried in the nickname of Bloody Joe, stepped outside the cookshack, and shielded his eyes with one flour-dusted hand.

"Trouble, boss!" he sang out. "Thet's Billy, an' shore'n hell's hot, he's hurted bad!"

The rider lurched in the saddle as he drew his horse up, and a dust-caked black spot on his cotton shirtfront gave evidence to the seriousness of his injury, and his reddened face seemed oddly pale.

"Howdy, boss!" he gasped, and fell as he tried to get down. Blade stopped to pull him upright. "I'm all right. Jist picked up a souvenir in my shoulder. Compliments of Chinker Kaye, damn him."

"What happened, Billy?"

"Plenty! I was workin' the north draws, had run out about forty head, when I heerd shootin', an' seed riders drivin' a hell of a big herd. First thing, I thought Charley'd gone loco. Then I seed they wasn't jist Dome cows. Boss, I swear they was cows in thet bunch with mossy horns, an' yearlin's taggin' along with 'em, that wore nary a brand! Somebody cleanin' out the drifts. I damn' soon got the hunch fer shore when I seed Chinker, big as life an' twice as ugly. He didn't waste no words, Chinker din't! He jist let fly and I went down. One surprised damned idiot, I can tell you!"

"Joe, help me get him on the porch. Get a bottle of whiskey. He needs something more than lemonade!" Together they got the wounded puncher to a chair, and Blade peeled his blood-encrusted shirt back. The shot was high, four inches too high to kill him.

"I wasn't expecting it, not this soon," Blade murmured.

"Expectin' it, hell!" Billy Bishop swore. "It's done occurred! Chinker's makin' the biggest damn' drive the Dome ever seed. He's cleaned out pockets we ain't worked in ten years. Drivin' straight through. He'll be over the ridge. An' Charley an' the boys are workin' east past the Dome, clear to hell an' gone!"

"Maybe not, boss!" Joe put in, coming up with a dark bottle. He held it up to Billy's pain-twisted lips. "I seed riders

comin' in. Reckon it's Prentiss."

Men rode into the yard at a full gallop. Prentiss hit the ground running. His sweat-streaming face was working savagely. "Hell to pay, Talbot!" he called out. Then he saw Billy Bishop, and his jaw snapped shut. "I'll be go to hell!" he ejaculated. "You mean they hit west, too?"

"Looks like it, Charley," Blade said. "How bad is it?"

"Don't know. Me'n three o' the boys was groupin' some back o' the Dome. We'd come up to thet nester ootfit over there an' shore'n hell they opened up on us with rifles. We scattered. I never seed a damned farmer yet that could shoot wuth two cents. Along about then we see a hell of a big dust cloud movin' fast. We got out, moved east, run plumb into them. About twenty riders, maybe more, moving five-six hundred head. Mostly Thompson's Spiderweb brand, but some Dome. An' boss, it was Nate Chantelle an' his boys. I seed him clear an' good, jist like I'm seein' you now."

Blade's face stiffened, slowly, set into an iron-hard pattern.

Prentiss shrugged. "We drew back shootin' but four men ain't botherin' Chantelle. I ordered the boys back to the ranch afore somebody got killed. They wasn't a chance of us four stoppin' 'em."

"You did the right thing, Charley," Blade said. "Let them go. We can't stop their drive. It's too late to stop those Billy ran into, and we can't get the men in fast enough to tangle with Nate."

Billy Bishop swallowed raw whiskey, choked, then cried out, "What the hell *are* we goin' to do, Boss?"

Blade ran his hand over the wounded boy's short-cropped blond hair. "You're going to ride your bunk for a week. That's for you. As for the rest of us—" He stopped, narrowed his eyes. "Charley, get the boys in. Let the work go. I want every rider on the Dome here tonight. We'll chow down here at the ranch, then move out after dark."

"Company comin', Boss!" Bloody Joe sang out. "Damned if ain't some of them nesters!"

Blade wheeled about, saw Prentiss's hand slip down his gun. Blade shook his head.

Two men rode into the ranchyard. Blade recognized the older as the man he had met on the ridge, rolling the wagon wheel up from where it had fallen. He remembered sending Jack Wyatt over with beef for them, and had ridden down twice and seen their place in the canyon behind the Dome. The rustlers must have driven across their section with the stolen herd that morning.

The older man seemed uneasy. He carried a rifle across his saddle. The boy, whom Blade had not seen before, was under twenty, spare of build, and he carried an ancient twin-barrelled shotgun. He eyed the riders nervously.

"Mister Talbot, reckon you remember me? Ike Windstrom. This's my oldest boy, Luke. We moved into thet hunter's cabin, staked our claim for a quarter section."

"I know you." Blade waited.

WINDSTROM swallowed nervously. "Hell, I ain't one to beat aroun' the bush. You been mighty white to us, causin' us no trouble. I come over here to tell you I ain't sidin' with them cow-stealers who rid by this mornin'." He swallowed again. "Fellers sometimes get the wrong slant about things. I started thinkin' about you askin' me if'n I meant to fence in water, an' I seen what it might mean. Your men been mighty good to us, fetchin' in grub, givin' us a hand. It wasn't what I was expectin' from you. I'm makin' it out here, an' all because o' you. I jist wanted to say if you're in trouble now, by gum me an' Luke are aimin' to help you."

Charley Prentiss stared at the man unbelievingly, then glanced at Blade. Blade nodded, slowly. "I thank you for that, Ike. I reckon you know what you're doing? Some others of your kind won't take kindly to you siding with me."

"Then that's their right, I reckon." Ike Windstrom shrugged. "This whole deal's been fought hammer an' tongs when there ain't no use for it. I see that. Open range ain't always goin' to be open; plenty o' time for fencin' when it's decided upon. Meantime I been sellin' garden truck to you an' other ranchers, and sellin' the rest in Buffalo Horn. This land's big enough for all of us. Maybe there'll be some trouble over land. Expect there will be. But it can an' will be settled peaceable."

"You're welcome to stay," Blade said. "One of my men has been shot—cattle stolen. This is the biggest raid we've ever had. Somebody's going to get hurt before it's over. I want you to know that."

"A man's got to think out where he stands before he makes a move," Windstrom said. "I've done my thinkin'."

"All right, Charley, you've got your orders. Get to it!" Blade's voice snapped like the crack of a whip, and the foreman went down the steps at a run.

"Scatter, boys!" he yelled. "Stay out of trouble. You run into Kaye or Chantelle or their men—let 'em through. Get the boys. Get 'em back here afore nightfall. Now ride!"

The four horses were running before they'd gone a hundred feet. Blade felt his bad leg start to shake, placed a hand on a porch upright to steady himself. Ike Windstrom had dismounted, and walked now up onto the porch, stared down at the wounded Billy Bishop.

"I've had some book-larnin' about medicine," he said, slowly. "I kin fix him up with a bandage an' git him to bed 'thout hurtin' him."

"Thanks." Blade went into the house. He walked slowly, favoring the injured leg. He came up to a tall wooden closet, stared at it, then dug a key from his pocket, unlocked it. He swung the doors back and the polished glint of steel and hardwood shone out. Rifles and handguns, all cleaned and oiled, were placed there, and he hesitated a moment before pulling down his belt of cartridges. He chose a Smith and Wesson Model Number Three, loaded it, slipped it into the holster. He closed his eyes; his right hand made a deliberate stabbing motion, underhand, and the gun was levelled before him, ready to fire. The barrel was steady, did not tremble, and he knew his natural accuracy of aim was not gone. He returned to his chair on the porch.

A buckboard rolled into the ranchyard, and he opened his eyes. Maudilene Sanner came up the stairs, her face pale.

"I heard what's happened. You're going after them, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Buffalo Horn's gone crazy. Men in the streets, shouting, yelling. Half the ranchers have been hit hard. The rustlers scattered into groups, staged drives across every range where they could get into the brakes before pursuit could be organized. Virgie Thompson's like a wild man. Chayme Baxter's gathering an army of ranchers. He swears he'll kill every man in Tall Pine and burn the town." Blade smiled.

"Talk, Maudie. They'll ride in circles—or into a trap."

"They mean it, this time, Blade." She faced him. "It's Nate Chantelle, isn't it?" She read the sudden pain in his eyes as he nodded.

"Yes, it's Nate. He once told me that he hoped whoever hung him picked a tall tree. That's one thing we haven't got here in the Tallows, a tall tree."

"You'll let him go?"

He didn't answer for a moment, staring fixedly at the towering mass of the Dome, frowning down on the valley below. "I don't know, Maudie," he said finally. "You can't always let him go. Nate's thrown a big loop—to catch himself."

"You can't, Blade—" she stopped, turned quickly away. His face was stone. He made no move.

"You'll stay here," he said. "You'll be safe. We'll be back within two days. Billy Bishop got hit. Take care of him. You can send Joe to Buffalo Horn for the doctor. Better ask him to be here when we get back." She nodded, slowly. "And, Maudie—have you seen Tod? He should be riding with us."

"No. He's probably sneaked off to Buffalo Horn again."

"All right, it's probably best he isn't mixed up in this, anyway."

The door closed behind her.

IT WAS a silent, intense group of men who stood to their horses before the Dome ranchhouse that night. Blade Talbot came out onto the porch, surveyed them without speaking. Not including the disabled Billy Bishop, there were fourteen Dome riders; with Blade and the Windstroms, there were sixteen. Not many, considering what they were likely to run into, Blade thought; but he also knew the temper of these riders, every man of whom he knew and liked personally. And the grim silence

of their mood affected him.

"We're ready, boss," Prentiss said, striding forward. "Jerry's bringin' some extra coils of rope. We'll make this final an' damn quick."

"All right. We move out now. You'll ride in a group until we reach Tall Pine. The town will be ready for us, that's my guess. But I think we've got something they won't be expecting. Ride quiet; save your talk for the bunkhouse when we get back. We're not riding to a massacre; you'll shoot when I pass the word, and not until then. Let's go."

They had ridden some three miles, when Ferdie Grant, one of the Dome riders, spurred up. "Somebody usin' the road an' they're burnin' the hell out o' it, boss!" he said, keeping his voice low.

Blade held up a hand as he reined in. The men scattered silently, and guns appeared. Blade and Prentiss held to the road, the others spread out beside them. For a moment thick silence held, then Blade caught the drumming sound of hoofs, close, surging up. Men, many riders, coming hard and fast!

A halloo sounded down the road. "Who's there?"

"The Dome!" Prentiss yelled. "Come along slow."

The bunched group slowed, and slowly through the unleavened black of night, Blade made out the tall figures of men astride horses. One man spurred up before the others, tall, thin, a heavier figure closing behind him.

"That you, Talbot?" Virgie Thompson's voice was strident, as if the man were strung to the bursting point.

"Okay, Virgie, ride down." Blade waited. The night was still. The calm air was cold, and the stars seemed bright points of ice, plunging down. Beyond the Tallows, a darkness held low, folding in slowly over the mountains, only an occasional rift showing the tip-tilted moon scudding down to the horizon.

"We were too late to catch you at the Dome," Thompson wheezed. He was breathing hard. "It was Chayme's idea to push on after you. You been hit hard?"

"Yes." Blade waited a moment. He saw the heavy-shouldered Chayme Baxter close up the distance between them, wait silently, as if placing importance upon his next words. "We got hit hard. But they won't drive far in the brakes by night. We'll come out from the south and return most of them."

"You figger they'll jist let you ride in?" Virgie laughed. "Hell, they left three dead men behind them; cleaned out half the ranchers in this end o' Wyoming. I told you we'd orter get goin' afore this happened."

"So you did, Virgie," Blade said. "And I told you the Dome would take care of itself. That still stands."

Other riders came up to the group. One, Millard Beekman, who had a small spread this side of Thompson's big Spiderweb, spoke up. "You're in this, too, Talbot, like you should have been all along. Me for one, am damn' sick o' ridin'. Ridin', with nothin' to show fer it but a sore butt-end. I say we're askin' you to take over this ootfit an' end this mess once an' for all."

"That goes for me, too!" another chimed in. Strangely enough it was Chayme who spoke up next.

"Reckon Millard an' the others have said what I was goin' to, an' a hell of a lot blunter. You're headin' for Tall Pine to settle this—I'm ridin' with you."

Baxter's stand surprised Blade only for a moment. He let a slow smile twist his mouth. "How about you, Virgie?"

"Hell, I've felt the same way all along. I ain't meanin' no disrespect, Baxter, but we ain't accomplished nothin' but to stir up a damned hornets' nest about ours ears. If Blade's movin' now, it's because he knows what he's goin' to do. I'm with you, Blade."

Talbot raised his voice. "Now hear me, you men! This isn't a game, and we're not all coming back. Think about that. Some of you are here because you don't want to look like a coward. That's all right. But I'm telling you now to clear out, go home." He waited a moment but not one man moved. "All right. Now hear this! If I'm the man running this show, it'll be run my way. That means you'll do what I say, and nothing else! Is that understood?" He waited once more. Cries of assent came quickly.

"You're headin' for Tall Pine, ain't you?" Baxter was close. His voice held an odd

note of tenseness.

Blade nodded, then aware that Chayme Baxter couldn't see the gesture, said, "That's right. We'll hit Tall Pine first.

He didn't see the swift expression of relief that heightened Baxter's expression, nor did he see Baxter's hand stealing to the butt of his gun. But as the enlarged party rode on, still in grim silence, he did notice that Chayme Baxter and his CB men drifted slowly to the rear, and Blade thought grimly of the closing jaws of a trap.

XIV

THE lights of Tall Pine began to twinkle in the near distance, separating from a single jewel-bright cluster to individual lights as they neared. Blade Talbot pulled in his horse, and the party stopped.

"All right, men," he called out. "I can tell you now they'll be waiting for us to start something. We'll ride in slow. I'll drop the first man that shoots without being told to do so. We're going to talk first." He turned slowly. "Ike, you and Luke ride here with me."

He glanced about, saw Virgie Thompson. Baxter was out of sight, to the rear with his men. Of Charley Prentiss there was no sign, and he was glad he'd had the opportunity to speak in Charley's ear as they had ridden out.

"You others fall in behind us. Keep ready, and keep your eyes open and your mouths shut." He spurred his horse into a walk, kept the steady pace as they neared the town.

The lights scattered slowly as they approached. They passed darkened farms, deserted to all appearances. But in the distance there was a growing hum of men's intent, angry voices, stilling as their hoofbeats cut through the still night air. It had grown strangely warm, almost muggish, and Blade turned twice to glance at the dark mass of cloud that crept slowly over the Tallows, obscuring the stars.

A flare of light up ahead of them mushroomed bigger by the instant. A mound of dry sage had been piled in the center of the street, carts, wagons, boxes, upturned beside it, a barricade behind which men moved slowly, uncertainly, peering past the circle of the growing fire. Blade held up his hand for the band to halt, then nodded at the two Windstroms, and rode closer.

"That's close enough, Talbot!" A man yelled, and Blade recognized Charley Brant's voice. He ignored the command, but still holding his right hand high, empty of weapon, rode closer. "You heard me, dammit!" Brant screamed.

"Sure, I hear you, Brant," Blade replied, and reined in. He stared past the fire at the grouped men there in the street. They numbered most of the population of Tall Pine, of the outlying farms about it. More than a hundred strong, almost every man carrying a rifle or shotgun. He was outnumbered. And behind him Baxter and his CB men closed the trap.

"We all know what you come for, you an' yore lousy Regulators!" Brant cried. "Well, you want trouble, by heck we'll see you get it!"

"Who you speaking for, Brant? Nate Chantelle, and Chinker Kaye and his rustling killers?" Blade's voice held steady. "Hear me, all of you! This has gone far enough. We mean to end it tonight."

"Yo're damn right we will!" a man yelled from beyond the barricade. "What are we waitin' fer?"

"Shut up, you blasted fool!" Ike Windstrom spurred forward, between Blade and the barricade. "You all know me. I'm Ike Windstrom, and my boy Luke's here with me!"

"Hey, wait a minnit!" a man spoke up. "What the hell you doin' out there with them murderin' coyotes, Ike? You belong over here. Get over the barricade an' make it quick. We'll hold our fire."

"Shut up!" Windstrom's voice bellowed out, drowning all other sound. "I came out here same as the rest o' you! I didn't have a blessed thing to my name. My kids was starvin' by the time Brant an' his sharpers got through with us here in Tall Pine. That's why we moved on west o' the Tallows!"

"Aw, hell, what we waitin' fer, Brant?" A man yelled. "Shut the old windbag up an' let's git this over with. I'm cravin' a shot o' redeye!"

"You'll more likely get a shot of lead in your drunken guts if you listen to Brant!" Ike stormed. "Listen to me, all of you.

Wyomin's a state now. They's state law here. You know why these men have come here? Because that law's been broken—if not by you men here in Tall Pine, at least by others you condone. Men like Brant an' Kaye, an' killers like Chantelle. Most of you don't like thieves no better than I do. Put yourself in the place of the ranchers. They can't sit by and watch you comin' in, fencin' range, hoggin' water, stealin' cattle an' not do somethin' about it. But they's laws fer that now. What's happened is you've let your own fear, and selfishness blind you to what you've been led into. I'm not sayin' there won't be trouble between nester an' rancher as long as the range is free to those who're strong enough to take it. But it can be settled peaceable. I'm tellin' you men this ain't your fight. Talbot an' these others ain't here to fight you, nor to bother you in any way. East of the Tallows it's nester land; there won't be no general movement west until this land is settled. The ranchers know that. That's why they've tolerated you this long."

His voice was strong, urgent, ringing clear.

He urged his horse close against the barricade.

"Get out of the street. Tall Pine's been outlaw long enough. You can make it a decent place to live and come to, but it's got to be cleaned out. That's goin' to happen whether you try to stop it or not. I say get out of the way. It ain't your fight. I promise you you'll be left alone. Is that fair enough?"

A man spoke up. "Hell, we all know Windstrom's a fair-minded man. What're we fightin' Brant's fight fer? Let's git to hell out o' this!"

"Hear me, men!" It was Brant, wild-eyed, panic starting in his face. But he got no further. From the street, behind the Regulators, a shot barked. Ike Windstrom clutched his chest, fell forward. A second shot roared, but Blade was moving clear. It missed.

"Take 'em, Dome!" he yelled. Instantly the street erupted into violence. Behind the grouped Regulators, Charley Prentiss and the Dome riders opened fire on Baxter and his men. Three horses went down, a man screamed, gunshots thundered. A bullet-stung horse, a fighting rider swaying dangerously atop him, plunged head-on into the fire, scattering it the length of the barricade. The sun-dried wood of carts and wagons and barrels caught instantly.

BEHIND the barricade was confusion. Men scattered towards the buildings to either side. Brant and his men were suddenly, appallingly, alone. Blade caught a glimpse of them, fired three times. Then Regulators surged forward into the barricade. Ropes dragged burning wagons out of the way. Men rode through. Some of Brant's followers went down.

Then, as suddenly as the fight had started, it was over. The street, brightly lit by a hundred fires, was clear save for the milling Regulators, and several prone bodies that did not move. In the street beyond, hoofs thundered out of the town, Prentiss rode up to Blade. A bloody stripe marked his face. He shook his head ruefully.

"He got away. He'll ride straight for the brakes, Blade, an' heaven help us if we go after him."

Virgie Thompson came up. His face was puzzled. He mopped at his face, shook his head. "What in the name o' heaven happened? Ike Windstrom—speakin' up like that—then Baxter—it was him shot Windstrom. I was ridin' to get him to come up, when all hell busted loose. He shot Ezz Tooey, an' two others went down before his men."

Blade saw Luke Windstrom huddling over the fallen figure of his father, and swung off his horse, half-ran towards them. Luke looked up, tears streaking his fuzzy-cheeked face.

"Thank God he ain't kilt!" the boy cried out. "I tole 'im he hadn't orter butt into somethin' thet was none o' his business."

"It was his business, Luke," Blade said, shortly. Ike shook his head dazedly.

"Shut up talkin' like thet, Luke. These men are our friends. You don't pick friends by labelin' 'em ranchers or nesters or rustlers. You find 'em an' you stick by 'em, even if it means fightin' for 'em. Remember that, young 'un." He saw Blade, smiled. "I did my best. I hope some of 'em listened to me."

"Most of them, Ike," Blade said, slowly. "Without your help—well, it would have ended differently."

He stood up. "Luke, get your dad off the

street. There'll be someone to help you and him. When he can ride, get him back to the Dome."

He didn't wait for an answer, but moved down the street toward Brant's place, Virgie Thompson beside him, still worrying over his problem.

"I just don't get it, Blade," Virgie insisted. "What the hell's the deal?"

"Man, are you blind? Can't you see the cover that Chayme's been using? Wake up. We've started a job we've got to finish."

Prentiss came up at a run. "Brant's in his saloon. He run the women out the back. They've all headed for the Selby House—Marl Wright's place."

"Get some tar-barrels off the street. Break them up against Brant's," Blade ordered. "Touch them off. All right, you men! Scatter out. They may come out shooting. You, Jerry, bring the ropes. We'll be needin' them pronto."

He stepped closer. His voice deepened to a shout. "Hear me, Brant!" he yelled. "We're touchin' off your place. It'll be burning in a minute. Come out now. Throw your guns into the street. Come out with your hands up!"

For an instant there was no reply, then the answer came from spouting guns. The front windows went out with a crash of breaking glass, and the men inside opened fire. The Regulators scattered instantly. A horse was hit, and reared screaming with pain, then bolted down the street. The Regulators returned the fire, and slowly through the growing pall of smoke that filled the street, a reddish glow began to spread.

"My God, she's goin' like a tinderbox pine!" a man yelled.

The whole front of Brant's place was obscured with smoke, billowing, curling, twisting, followed instantly by red flames that ate upwards, turning the night to garish brilliance.

"Lookout! Hyar they come a-shootin'!" A man cried.

It was true. Blade saw men rush from the smoke-screened building into the street, with guns lancing red into the night around them. Then the guns of the Regulators thundered, a rippling crescendo of sound and fury. Smoke curled out, billowed, swallowed the group of outlaws, and when it flurried upward, only one man stood erect. It was Charley Brant, face bloody, weaving on his feet, empty guns in his hand, mouthing curses. Flames leaped behind him, outlining him, and the guns of the Regulators spoke abruptly. He was pounded backward, dead before he struck the dirt of the street.

"Seven of them," Prentiss hissed close beside Blade. "Reckon thet does it up brown hyar."

"Just about, Charley," Blade said. He saw Virgie Thompson, awkwardly tying a bandage about a wounded left hand. The thin rancher's face was sweaty, the roiling heat of the burning building fanned now by a growing wind from the west.

"All you men. Listen to this!" Blade raised his voice. "You'll split up. Take both sides of the street. You know what to do. Leave the feed and grain store; and leave the general store. There's nothing else worth saving. Charley, get the Dome together. We'll stop by the Selby House, then we're riding out."

"Gotcha, boss!" Prentiss sped away.

"Wait a minnit, Blade!" Virgie protested. "You ain't sayin' we're ridin' into the brakes tonight?"

Blade ignored him, stalked down the street. He stepped to the porch of the Selby House. Regulators were gathering. Someone had overturned a tar barrel across the porch, but it had not yet been fired. The big room inside the broad glass-windowed door was brightly alight. He saw pale faces staring out. He kicked the door open and stepped inside, only to pause and draw back as he saw Marl Wright's stricken face. Stark tragedy limned her dark eyes, but she smiled at him.

"You've won, Blade," she said. "I knew you would. I knew it would end this way. It always does. Hays City, Abilene, a dozen others, and now Tall Pine. Where is there after Tall Pine, Blade?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Marl. You'll be all right. There'll be some wagons here by morning to take you women to the railhead."

"Sure, I'll be all right. My kind always is." She laughed bitterly. "This will be goodby, Blade. No matter how long it takes, when it's time to say goodby it doesn't seem half enough time. You know about Chayme

Baxter, I guess. He tipped the whole thing. He made a mistake trying to outguess a man who rode the Trail before he rode a horse. And you'll know about Nate, too. That's the hell of something like this. You know that Nate will fight if you corner him?"

"I know, Marl."

"Then I guess that's all. Goodby, good luck—and, Blade—God bless men like you. You make life interesting for—for women like me."

"Goodby," he said, softly, then turned away. He stepped to the porch. Prentiss was there, waiting.

"Ready, boss!" he called out.

Virgie Thompson seized Blade's arm. "Good heaven, Blade, you really mean to follow Baxter into the brakes? You're crazy. They'll slaughter us."

BLADE stared over the tiny town, past the buildings' red glow in the sky, at the lowering blackness in the sky. "Virgie," he said slowly, "now maybe you can understand why I backed out of the Regulator setup, why I said I'd wait for trouble to come to me. I wouldn't go looking for it. Because a man's way isn't the easy way. Never. You count on trouble blowing over; you hope with everything you've got that it will. And when it doesn't—when it doesn't—then you can't let anything in God's green earth stop you from putting an end to it. Now tell your men to get their horses. We're riding out."

Thompson stared at Blade as if he had never seen him before, then slowly he nodded. "Shore, yo're right, Blade. We'll be ready when you are."

Prentiss returned, grinned. "Tall Pine's shore goin' to be a mess, boss. But I reckon they can rebuild it—if anybody wants it back."

Blade nodded. "That's right, Charley. I just wish other things were as easily done over." He paused for a moment, staring down the red-shadowed street, then up once more at the towering storm clouds that were roiling in fast. "Let's get to it."

They left Tall Pine in clustered groups that merged slowly as they entered the brakes. The Dome riders rode af the van, and Prentiss made it a point to ride down the line while two other Dome riders were sent out ahead.

Two hours out of Tall Pine the storm struck suddenly. The wind failed suddenly; a deadly stillness swept over the bunched horsemen, then all hell broke loose. Snow-squalls pivoted about them, whipping their faces, blinding them; hell-driven winds screamed and moaned over their heads, and the night went black. They rode slowly for another half-hour, then Virgie Thompson grasped Blade's arm.

"We can't go on through this," he protested. "We'll have to wait for it to die down. It'll settle down to a steady blow before morning."

"Sure it will—and Baxter and his men will be waiting for us to do just that."

"Hell, we'll ride right into them before we see them, this way."

"They can't see any better than we can," Blade answered. The wind tore the words from his mouth.

Thompson fell back into gloomy silence, huddling down in his saddle, drawing his coat tighter across his chest. They were well into the brakes before they were fully aware of it. The snow was a constant hail against their faces, and the wind screamed shrilly in their ears. Then slowly the wind was channelled, even stronger, by merging canyons as they dipped into the broken land of the Tallows.

In the lee of a projecting ridge, Blade reined in, waited for Prentiss to come up with him. The foreman appeared out of the gray-black pall of night.

"All right, Charley, from here on it's your show. You know the brakes."

"Okay, boss." The foreman hesitated. "It's my guess we're close to Midway Rock. It'll be on our right. We shouldn't miss it. From there we can head straight for Box Canyon. It's my guess that's where Chinker's holed up. Last summer I tracked three head of horses he stole in here. Got a wrong turn an' came out on the mesa overlooking the canyon. But I got a pretty good picture of the layout. There's a narrow canyon in, an' no way out. If it wasn't for the storm I'd say Chinker'd block the trail in, stayin' up high. But as it is, he'll hole up for the storm, figgerin' we ain't comin' through until mornin'—an' by then he'd be ready."

Prentiss took the lead then, the men narrowing the column, riding with scarves

over their lower faces, hunched down against the biting edge of the wind. For Blade, the ride was sheer hell. His leg had stiffened. He could not bend it.

He almost rode into the man as Prentiss stopped. He shouted something that was lost in the wind, then he bent closer, cupping his hands about his mouth. "There's the rock!" he yelled. "Bear right. Keep close together because it's gettin' rough."

They plunged sharply into the canyons beyond Midway Rock, and the wind was cut, howling far over their heads, but the snow drifted and settled, and more than once a horse went down, spilling its rider. But they pressed on, and Blade felt that the reluctance of the men was giving way to something harder.

Abruptly, as they rounded a sharp turn, Prentiss stopped. Blade rode up beside him. The narrow passage was just wide enough for the two horses to stand abreast. Prentiss bent close.

"Here we are. This's the mouth of Box Canyon. Reckon I picked it right when I said they'd hole up until the storm blew itself out. Do we ride in?"

Before Blade could reply, Prentiss was viciously proven to be mistaken. From the height of the canyon wall to the right came the sharp crack of a rifle. A man behind them fell from the saddle. Instantly, as if the single shot were a signal, from across the entire breadth of the narrow canyon, guns flamed and spat leaden death.

"It's a trap!" a man screamed.

Then the sudden cries and yells were lost in the shrilling of the storm-mad wind, and the ugly thunder of barking guns.

XV

FOR an instant there was nothing but confusion. A riderless horse plunged into Blade's mount. He fought to stay in the saddle. Then the horse went between him and Prentiss, and Blade got his own mount under control. Prentiss had both guns out, was firing straight into the narrow pass before them.

"Dome!" Blade yelled, the fighting cry of the ranch. He heard the cry taken up behind him. "Dome! Dome!"

The milling ended as abruptly as it started, and men surged forward, guns blazing. Blade tugged his rifle free from the boot, cradled it in his arms.

"We're going in!" he yelled. For an instant his voice held them, penetrated the chaotic uproar of the moment, and it was enough. He drove in his spurs, felt the horse surge forward. Then Prentiss was beside him, and he heard the wild, angry voice of Virgil Thompson, not far behind.

"Let's go!"

The two or three riflemen above them fired blindly through the falling snow, but the shots were uneven, poorly aimed. Then before them, where the canyon narrowed, Blade saw scurrying movement, the red flashes of guns. His rifle came up, and his knees gripped the barrel of his horse to steady him. He emptied the rifle in one long, violent burst and the men ahead of them scattered, gave way.

"Yahooo! Dome!" Charley Prentiss was spurring forward. Cries. Yells. Horses went down. The wind took a sudden, crazy plunge into the canyon, drove against them, blinding them, blurring the whole insane scene.

The rifle empty, Blade thrust it into the boot, pulled his handgun. He spurred forward, into a scrambling run. A man was before him, running. His gun snapped, bucked in his hand, and the man went sprawling into the new snow.

The canyon widened suddenly, and the defenders were driven back. Snow veiled men from each other, gusts of wind caught at them, pushed at them, blinded them; but the Regulators drove forward. Then abruptly Blade's horse, in the lead, crashed into a wooden obstruction, surged back, almost went down. Blade fought to keep his saddle. A rifle roared almost in his face, and his hat was gone. His gun barked reply, but he could not see his opponent. A hasty barrier of brush and wood, had been piled here, and his yell brought men to him.

"Rope this stuff out of the way!" he ordered. They worked with crazy urgency, and the makeshift barrier vanished. The defenders had drifted back. The canyon was clear.

"That was Chinker and his men!" Prentiss yelled. "Baxter'll be behind him with his CB riders—look out."

Blade spurred on. Behind him men came surging; there was no holding back, no shying free of the task before them. Silence held them, a grim, deadly silence that would not break until the job was finished and done with.

Through the silent, wind-swept canyon they pushed. Then Blade saw the lights of cabins far ahead, blurred, then obscured by snow—but there was no chance for elation, or anything else. Horsemen came at them, hard-driven, determined to get through. In the van he saw the hulking figure of Chayme Baxter. Blade brought his gun up and spurred his horse to meet him.

They came together, running; Baxter's gun flashing as he rode. Then Blade fired, once, twice, three times—and the horse went past him, riderless. Chayme Baxter was down. Men crushed against him, someone struck at him with their rifle, but he fended the blow. Guns thundered, then fell silent, and men closed. Horses fell, screaming, then the oncoming surge of the Regulators cleared the passage and they were in the open. Blade broke free, saw men wheeling their horses, racing back the way they had come.

"An' thet's the end of the CB!" Prentiss yelled. "Let's get the rest of them!"

Blade tried to reply, then something hulking enormous, reared up before him. He saw a man's distorted, blood-smeared face. It was Chayme Baxter. The rancher yelled, his gun exploded. Blade felt a hot iron laid across his chest, reeled back in the saddle. Even as he fell back, his gun spoke. Baxter's face vanished in a sudden, blotting spur of blood, then the hulking body went down under the running, pounding hoofs of Blade's horse.

A blackness struck at Blade, but he fended it off, held on to his senses. He tried to rein in but the horse was running free. Behind him men yelled, and guns split the night with their violence. Ahead of him the lights appeared once more, only to black out. Guns spoke ahead. Then the Regulators were in a thin, steady line, spurring forward.

Canvas-topped slab-sided shanties went down. Men's wild screams came up, vanished in the wind. A torch was lighted, applied to damp canvas—a flame grew, slowly, and blinding, choking smoke eddied and drifted in the wind-gusts. Blade was aware of the rest of the fight only dimly, of thudding sounds, of harsh cries, of blinding shots blazing through the gloom. Then his horse shuddered and stopped, and he could not urge the animal on. Other riders went past him. The turmoil and thundering tumult grew wilder, crazier—then fell into silence.

Slowly the horse, legs braced, gave way, and fell. Blade tried to throw himself clear, but could not. Then hands grasped him, pulled him free, and wet, cold snow was pressed against his head, and it cleared. He saw Virgil Thompson's anxious face, pressed close to his, and he shook his head.

"I'm okay. Baxter's last shot—nipped me across the chest—tore a gouge—that's all."

Thompson nodded with relief. "It's about over," he said, slowly, heavily. "You know what's left to be done. The boys have started already. They've got Chinker Kaye an' Nate Chantelle at the cabin. Chantelle's hurt bad but he'll live long enough to swing."

"Lead the way, Virgie," Blade urged.

"You shore you want in on the rest of this?"

Blade didn't reply, started forward. Thompson came with him. The men were dismounted, grouped about the main cabin in the clearing of the box canyon. Prentiss came up.

"Guess it's all over but the dirty work. "Don't know how many of them got it, but we got twelve of 'em in the cabin. Five of Thompson's crew got hit, three of ours. Wyatt's dead, two others hurt bad." He stopped. "Boss, you stay out here. We kin handle the rest o' it."

"I told you I'd finish the job," Blade retorted.

Ropes had been stacked beside the door of the cabin. Inside other men stood with shotguns, while at the rear of the room huddled the outlaws, not one of whom but bore a wound of some kind. Blade came inside, stared at them. He couldn't focus his eyes properly. Blurred faces stared back at him. He shook his head.

A man stuck his head in the door. "We're ready. Send 'em out one at a time."

Prentiss was staring at Blade. He felt Virgie close beside him. Then he saw

Chinker Kaye. The outlaw was chewing tobacco, and as he caught Blade's eyes, he spat to the floor.

"How d'yuh like it, Tall Man?" he taunted.

For a moment Blade didn't understand. Then, beside Chinker, he saw Nate Chantelle, smiling—and Tod Breen. The boy's curly blond hair was wildly disarrayed, and his shirt was torn. His face had a bloody scratch down one cheek. His eyes were closed.

A man behind Chinker groaned. "My God, they cain't hang us all?"

"What did you think they'd do, Randall, kiss us?" Chinker guffawed. "There's the stinkin' little skunk you thought so much of, Talbot. Look at 'im, cryin' his eyes out. He's thinkin' you're goin' to be soft an' let him go—but you ain't, damn you. Yo're goin' to hang him jist like the rest o' us! Yuh know why? You know how we got wise to yore pal, Gusty Boone? Because yore stinkin' kid gave him away, that's why!"

Chinker's wild laughter came again, then died abruptly. "The hell I'm headin' for ain't nothin' to the one you've already got."

"Shut up, Chinker." Chantelle was pale as he spoke. He kept his left hand folded against his upper stomach, but blood oozed out between his fingers as he breathed. His pale blue eyes were bright, shining. "Blade, only a crazy man would try to love a cougar. The kid's no good. Never was any good."

Blade turned and groped his way to the door. He stumbled as he walked away. Behind him he heard Prentiss' coarse voice. "All right, let's get to it!"

A man beside the doorway stooped, caught up the first coiled loop of rope. Then Blade was past him, into the cold harshness of the night.

SUMMER came to the Tallows. The cottonwoods about the springs blossomed, and the snow-white fluff cascaded down, mantling the ground about them in mock-winter dress, drifting in the idle mountain winds. The red blooms of the poplars burst forth behind the ranchhouse of the Dome and the dark gray and black of the sage seemed to thicken. At the mouth of Box Canyon, a plank was nailed to a stake, and a brief message was burned into the sun-dried wood. It was there that Blade Talbot often rode, and his mind brought clear pictures back. He reined in at the mouth of the canyon, and stared at the sign-board.

Organized Rustling in
Wyoming Ended Here.
May 3, 1893

That was all. No names, nothing more. But it was enough. Blade lifted his hat, mopped his sweaty face, rode back down the echoing canyons toward the ridge. *Ended here*—the words seemed to sing in his mind. Almost as if a good part of his life had ended there. He tightened his lips, and rode in silence.

As he topped the ridge, and saw the massive height of the Dome rising before him, his pulse quickened. The towering pines atop it, the glint of the summer sun in the rocks. Something of the old challenge, the old thrill, was returning. He reined in there, staring across the wide valley dotted with cattle. He saw the brightness of the flowers strewing the lower hills, the dark mass of the sage, spreading on and on across the brown prairies to where other mountains soared upwards, cutting them off.

For perhaps the hundredth time, he pulled Nate Chantelle's final letter from his shirt pocket and read it, this time with a meaning he had never found before. The letter had been given to him the morning after that terrible night in Box Canyon, by Charley Prentiss who said Nate had given it to him.

Dear Blade:

Sometimes a man does something he doesn't really want to do. Like maybe something's pushin him on. I feel kind a like that now. I told you once it was too late for men like me; even knowing how it was goin to come out, I had to go on. I want you to know it was like that with Tod Breen, too. No matter what he might mean to you, you could never mean anything to him. Maudie is different, an if you ain't a blind fool, you'll see that before it's too late. It ain't doin no good fer you to sit aroun mopin about spilled blood. It ain't goin to change nothin. It was goin to be like this from the beginnin', I think, only we ain't supposed to know in ad-

vance about it. When a man's born to be hung it don't make no difference whose rope does the hangin. Remember that, an forget.

Yore friend,
NATE

He crumpled the note slowly in his hand, tossed it from him. It was like a parting with something he had kept too long. A gust of wind caught it, sailed it away, until it was lost in the sage.

In the distance, riding out from the ranchhouse toward him, he saw a horse and rider. For a moment he held still, uncertain; then he removed his hat, waved it at the oncoming figure. A lithe arm shot up, joyously, and he knew her then. Maudie! His smile broadened, and he dug in his spurs, raced down from the ridge to meet her.

The Ace-High Hombre

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Colts . . . Cards . . . Caresses . . . Wild Brett Fargo found them all on the Wishbone's Wildhorse Mesa, south of Jubilo, Colorado's hell-for-leather boom town.

IT WAS late afternoon when Brett Fargo and Link Moffat came up out of Mad River canyon, Brett forking his buckskin, Moffat in a buckboard behind a team of blacks. Both men were freshly shaved and river scrubbed, and both wore clean duds, a metamorphosis which had occurred within the last two hours, for they had left roundup camp on Wildhorse Mesa that morning looking like saddle bums.

Brett squinted up at the sun. "Gonna hurry us to get haircuts. Maybe old Bushy'll be late getting into Jubilo."

"Old Bushy's never late when the weather's good," Moffat said.

"Then maybe we'll have to empty the barber shop."

Moffat grinned. "Reckon we can, seeing as we never pulled that trick off hereabouts."

Jubilo sprawled before them, one short business block with cabins and a few frame dwellings on both ends of the single street. Most of the buildings were unpainted, the majority of the false fronts still wearing the bright yellow of new pine lumber. Jubilo was hardly two years old, and because of its youth, an atmosphere of expectancy lay upon the town. This afternoon the street was lined with saddle horses, rigs, and burros, and it would be much the same every day until winter tied things up.

As they rode past the Hoof and Horn, Brett saw that Dan Duvane's big bay was tied in front. The horse had probably been there all day. Brett glanced at Moffat, but the broad face told him nothing. He had worked for Link Moffat for five years, he had rodded his spread for three, and still there were times when he felt the man was a stranger to him.

"Here's a place," Moffat said, and he turned in.

Brett tied beside the team, noting that the barber shop across the street was full. He said, "I'll drop into the Hoof and Horn and remind Dan the stage is about due."

Moffat took a hitch on his belt, eyes on the barber shop. "Stay out of the doorway when you start shooting. Last time we was in a hurry for a haircut you damned near got run over."

"I'll remember to duck," Brett said, and turned away.

Jubilo was a trail stop, born of a boom when gold had been struck at Midas City sixty miles up Mad River in the San Juan range. Because it was the only town between the mining camp and the river's confluence with the Colorado in the broken, red rock country to the west, it had become a supply point for prospectors, a stop-over for freighters, an oasis for cowhands on Saturday night, and a hangout for the rough bunch that drifted into Colorado across the La Sal range when Utah got too hot for them. Today, as usual, the Hoof and Horn was crowded, and it took Brett a moment to spot Dan Duvane at a poker table in the back of the big, smoke-filled room.

Brett shoved through the crowd to Duvane's table, thinking again he didn't understand Link Moffat. A year ago Duvane had proposed to Moffat's daughter Jill, and after thinking it over for a week, she'd said yes. In the first place it struck Brett as being mighty queer that it would take a girl a week to decide she was in love with a man, and in the second place it seemed even queerer that Moffat had stood for it. He knew as well as Brett did that Duvane wasn't the man for Jill. But then Brett was in love with Jill himself, a fact calculated to make a man prejudiced.

Duvane looked up when Brett said,

"Howdy, Dan." He was a big man with apple-red cheeks, a coloring that had not been given him by sunshine, and today his nose was nearly as red as his cheeks.

"Well, if it ain't old man Wishbone himself." Duvane picked up the bottle that stood on the table in front of him and held it out to Brett. "Have a drink, son."

Brett shook his head. Duvane carried his liquor as well as the next, but now he'd had about all he could take and his words were a little thick. It was exactly what Brett had expected, although he had hoped it would not be this bad.

Anger gave a fine edge to Brett's voice when he said, "Cash in, Dan. Better get sobered up."

Duvane put the bottle back on the table, lower lip jutting forward so that his face took on a mild resemblance to that of an English bulldog. "He says I need to sober up. What do you think of that, Naco?"

Naco Brown, sitting across from Duvane, laughed in his soft, velvet way.

"Hell, he's mixed up, Dan. You're not drunk."

There were several things here on Mad River that puzzled Brett. Brown's presence was one. He was a small, elegantly dressed man, dark-faced and mysterious. Jubilo had more than one inhabitant who was reticent about his past, and that was natural enough in a new country where law was more theory than fact, but Brown was not like the others. He would have seemed more at home in a boom camp like Midas City than a trail-spraddling cow town the size of Jubilo.

"The stage is about due," Brett said. "Jill's gonna be on it. Remember?"

Duvane waved a pudgy hand. "Sure I remember. Now get to hell out of here. I'm behind and there's only one way to catch up."

"Jill's . . ."

"I'll be on hand to greet her the way a man should greet his future wife. Stop worrying."

"We'll get him out there in time," Brown said.

Anger grew in Brett. Duvane needed a shave, his clothes were dirty, and whiskey smell was a stench upon him. Brett said, "If you ain't cleaned up, don't bother to meet her."

"Maybe you aim to take care of it?" Duvane challenged.

"Maybe I do," Brett said, and wheeled away.

Brett held a tight rein on his temper. No use blowing up and marring Jill Moffat's homecoming. The trouble was she deserved the best, but she wasn't getting it in Dan Duvane, even if his Double D was the biggest outfit on Mad River.

Brett had never been sure how big a mistake he had made in not telling Jill he loved her before Duvane got his loop on her. Link Moffat was pretty well fixed as cowmen went who were long on cattle and short on cash. Brett had waited, hoping for some kind of a miracle which would put him ahead, but Duvane had showed up ahead of the miracle and had offered Jill a diamond as big as the end of her thumb.

Crossing the street to the barber shop, Brett stopped in the doorway, glowering. There were two barber chairs, both occupied by men with lather on their faces, and a dozen more customers were waiting in rawhide bottom chairs along the wall.

The front barber paused, razor cocked above his customer's face. He said, "Won't be more'n a few minutes, Brett. You can wait alongside your boss."

Moffat was standing in the back beside the door that led into the bathroom. Someone was in the zinc tub, splashing and singing in a tuneless monotone.

"What boss?" Brett demanded. "If you're gabbing about that ugly-faced mistake of nature who calls himself Link Moffat, you're sure barking up the wrong tree. He ain't no boss of mine."

"You're damned right I ain't," Moffat bawled. "I wouldn't have a lowdown crawling son of a stinking sheepherder like you on Wishbone range."

Brett stepped away from the door. "Them's purty big words you're throwing my way. You aim to back 'em up?"

The men along the wall were on their feet now. The barbers had stopped working to stare at Moffat and then at Brett, uncertain how serious this was. Even the fellow in the tub poked his head out through the door to see what was going on.

"You're damned right I'm backing my words up," Moffat shouted. "Got your pine box picked out?"

"You're the gent who needs to do the picking," Brett flung back. "I claim you're too damned yellow to do anything but gab . . ."

Moffat let go with an oath and went for his gun. Brett threw a shot that slammed into the wall five feet over Moffat's head. Moffat's answering bullet came a split second later, splintering the window beside Brett.

It was enough. Both customers and barbers dived for the front door, swearing and shoving and trampling each other. For a moment they were motionless, straining to get out of the shop and unable to move, for their pressure had somehow wedged a fat man solidly in the door. Brett and Moffat went on firing until the room seemed ready to burst with the gun thunder, then the dam gave and men tumbled into the street.

Within a matter of seconds the barber shop was empty. Even the fellow who had

been in the tub went streaking through the front door, wet feet slipping on the floor, pants clutched in one hand, a towel in the other.

Moffat climbed into the back chair and, leaning back, laughed until he was out of breath. Brett reloaded his gun and dropped into the front chair, saying, "Wonder if old Boston will get his pants on before Ed throws him into the calaboose for being indecent?"

Moffat wiped the tears out of his eyes. "Was that Boston? He went by too fast for me to tell. All I could see was his bow legs and his red behind."

"It was Boston all right." Brett paused, and added, "Dan's drunk."

Moffat loaded his gun, saying nothing, the laughter in him dying. The barbers came in, razors still in their hands. Then one caught on, and began to swear.

"You cut us out of ten dollars worth of business . . ."

"We want haircuts and we want 'em fast," Brett cut in.

"Nothing doing. Get out of them chairs. You busted my front window and there's bullet holes in both walls. If you think you can pull off a smart trick . . ."

"We'll pay for the window," Brett said testily. "Now are you gonna get busy, or do you want a close lead shave?"

The barbers looked at each other, swallowed, and came back into their shop. Brett's gun skill was too well known on Mad River to be a matter of doubt.

"I wish you needed a shave," the front barber said angrily. "Damned if I wouldn't cut your throat."

"You came close to doing it the last time," Moffat said, amiable now. "That's why we took to shaving ourselves."

The barbers went back to work, still angry, and presently Marshal Ed Stack came in. He was a middle-aged man, proud of his star and the job he had done in keeping the toughs in line, but he was also a careful man who had learned long ago that a lawman got along better if he kept the right element on his side instead of antagonizing it. Link Moffat was an important man on Mad River.

"Arrest these yahoos," the front barber burst out. "They pulled off a fake ruckus just to get into the chairs. It ain't right."

Stack stroked his long yellow mustache, scowling. He said, "A pretty raw deal, Link. What's the hurry?"

"You know Jill's been gone for six months," Moffat said. "We had to get prettied up to meet the stage."

Stack nodded, grinning. "Say, I plumb forgot about Jill. O. K., Link. Pay the boys for the window."

BOSTON squeezed in past Stack, pants still clutched in his left hand, the towel held around his middle with the other. "Say, that was a dirty . . ."

"Ed, you don't stand for a man running around your town like that, do you?" Brett asked. "Why, if there was women on the street . . ."

"There wasn't," Stack said, "but maybe I ought to throw him into the jug at that."

"No you don't," Boston howled. "The water's cold now. I oughtta . . ."

"Aw, hell," Stack said testily. "Get back into the tub. You're hot enough to make the water boil."

The marshal wheeled out of the shop. Still muttering, Boston went back into the bathroom. The others who had been in the shop began drifting in, the two who had been in the chairs grumbling, as they wiped the dried lather from their faces.

"You're next," Brett said. "Now shut up."

When the barbers had finished, Moffat held out a five dollar gold piece. "Enough?"

The barber took the coin, nodding. "Next time wait your turn. Savvy?"

Moffat laughed. "Sure. This was a special occasion, my girl getting back to town." He winked at Brett, put on his Stetson, and went out.

There was still no sign of the coach, although it was time now. Moffat moved to the stage depot, suddenly bursting into a roaring laugh. "Worked slick as goose grease. Boston must have made some kind of a speed record getting out of there."

Brett wasn't listening. Dan Duvane had come out of the Hoof and Horn, lurching a little in an effort to maintain his dignity. Brett said, "I won't stand for it, Link."

Naco Brown had followed Duvane out of the saloon. He stood now in front of the

batwings, fingering an elk tooth that dangled from a gold chain stretched across his vest. Apparently he was unconcerned with the trouble that was shaping up, yet Brett knew he was missing nothing.

Duvane moved toward the stage depot, calling, "Told you I'd get here in time."

"Link, you know what it'll do to Jill if she sees him that way," Brett said softly.

Moffat held his silence. Duvane kept coming and now Naco Brown, dark face impassive, long-tailed black coat swinging wide from the butt of his holstered .45, moved along the walk behind him.

"Damn it, Link," Brett breathed. "If you ain't handling this, I am."

Brett glared at Moffat, not understanding this at all, for the Wishbone owner was not one to place anything before his girl's happiness. Ordinarily he was a pleasant man who enjoyed living, but now his block of a face was stone hard. He looked like a man who would never smile again.

Someone yelled, "Stage coming," and men began drifting out of saloons and stores and hotels.

Only then did Link Moffat force his stiff lips around the words, "Go ahead."

Brett dropped a hand to gun butt. "Get back into the saloon, Dan."

Duvane drew himself up to an exaggerated stop, highly insulted. "You don't order me around like that, Fargo. She's my girl. Savvy?"

"That's why you ain't seeing her. Come over tonight."

"And let you kiss her when she gets off the stage?" Duvane demanded belligerently.

"He's aiming to cut you out," Brown said. "I'll back you if you want to play it rough, Dan."

"How'd you get into this, Brown?" Brett asked.

Very cool, the dark man was, cool and insolent and deadly. He said, "Dan's my friend. That's answer enough."

Brett let it go at that. He nodded at Duvane. "She'll hate you if she sees you like this, Dan."

"That's right," Moffat added. "See her tonight, Dan."

Duvane swayed there, one fat hand lifted to his stubble-covered face, peering at Moffat as if he found it hard to focus his eyes on the Wishbone owner.

Brown said, "Friends don't work like this, Dan. Stick to your rights."

"She'll hate you," Brett said.

Duvane began to curse, right hand groping for his gun, and for a moment Brett thought there was no way out of the trouble. He'd have to kill Brown first and then turn his gun on Duvane, and he didn't want to do that, not as long as Jill Moffat wore Duvane's ring. So he hesitated, hoping that something would prevent trouble, and it came, but not in the way he had expected.

A man stepped between Duvane and Brett, a skinny dirty man with two weeks of black stubble on his face. His clothes were patched, his boot heels run over, and he stank of old sweat and cheap whiskey and chewing tobacco that made a brown stain around his mouth.

"Gimme a dollar for a meal." The skinny man pawed at Brett. "Just a dollar."

Brett raised a hand to strike the fellow. Moffat said, "Wait, Brett," and handed the man a dollar. The drunk reeled on toward the Hoof and Horn, stumbling and falling in front of Duvane. He got up and lurched on to the saloon.

"Maybe I look like that," Duvane muttered thickly. "Maybe I do."

"They're pushing you around," Brown pressed. "Fargo's trying to steal your girl."

But if Duvane heard he gave no sign. Turning, he walked back to the Hoof and Horn, steady now as if the sight of the drunk had sobered him.

The thunder of the coach and six was close, Bushy Reardon's whip cracking like pistol shots. Naco Brown waited a moment, black eyes pinned on Brett, thin lips tightly pressed against his white teeth. His right hand had been close to gun butt, the sun bringing a sparkling glitter from the diamond on his finger. Then he swung around and followed Duvane. Brett took a long relieved breath and turned toward the stage and Jill Moffat.

II

BUSHY REARDON always gave Jubilo a show when he brought his stage in. He was a good reinsman, an aristocrat of

the road as all jehus were. Now he tooled the swaying Concord in close to the walk, ribbons in one hand, silver-ferruled whipstock in the other, and slamming on the brake, brought the running horses and heavy coach to an abrupt stop at the exact place he intended to.

"Fetched her in for you, Link," Bushy called. "Safe and sound and purty as a picture."

Link Moffat was there, giving Jill a hand up, Brett a step behind. For a moment her face had been framed by the coach window, then the door swung open and she was in her father's arms, kissing him and clinging to him as if she had been gone for ten years instead of six months.

Pretty, all right, Brett thought. He had almost forgotten how pretty. She was wearing a wine-colored dress and a pink bonnet; she carried a ruffled parasol, and in spite of the reddish dust that had drifted into the coach upon her, she seemed fresh and radiant.

Brett stood motionless behind Moffat, not knowing quite what to say or do, but Jill gave him no chance to worry about it. She turned from Moffat and threw her arms around Brett with the same unstudied eagerness she had shown her father. She kissed him on the lips, the first time she had ever kissed him, and for that one moment Brett almost believed he was the man she loved instead of Dan Duvane.

Jill drew her lips away and putting her cheek against Brett's, asked in a tone so low that no one heard but him, "Where's Dan?"

"He couldn't come right now," Brett answered. "I mean, he's busy. Roundup, you know. He'll be over tonight."

She smiled brightly as if she believed it and turned to Ed Stack who stood on the walk. "How are you, Ed? How's Marie?"

Stack took her extended hand. "Fine, Jill. Fine as silk. Sure glad to have you back."

She shook hands with John Bellew the storekeeper, old Doc Hazen, and others she knew, asking about their wives and children. Then she said with the sparkling radiance that Brett liked, "I've been everywhere, but I wouldn't trade a square foot of Colorado for all the country between the Mississippi and the Atlantic."

"Now you can get married and be satisfied," Ed Stack said.

"That's right," she answered quickly, too quickly, Brett thought. "I'll be happy to live my life out right here on Mad River."

"Jubilo's growing," Bellew said with pride. "Two new buildings and Doc here is building a house."

"Best danged house this side of Midas City," the medico bragged.

"We'll have a house warming," Jill cried. "The biggest party anybody ever had on Mad River."

Bushy Reardon had handed her luggage down and Brett carried it to the buckboard. He stood waiting, and presently she crossed the street to him, her father beside her. She glanced at Brett's buckskin racked beside the rig and turned to Moffat as if impelled by a sudden girlish whim.

"Let Brett drive me home, Dad," she said. "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

The smile fled from Moffat's blocky face. He scratched his cheek, glancing instinctively at Brett. Then he nodded. "Sure, only Brett's got some things to do here in town."

"I'll come back," Brett said.

Without waiting for more talk, Jill climbed into the buckboard. "Come on, Brett. I'm anxious to get home."

Troubled, Moffat nodded and moved around the rig to Brett's buckskin. "I'll get along," he said, and mounting, rode out of town.

Brett stepped into the seat beside Jill and swung into the street. As they passed the Hoof and Horn, he saw that she was looking at the horses racked in front. She said nothing until the town was behind them. If she felt the curious stares that followed them, she gave no indication of it.

Then, as they started down the steep grade into the canyon, Jill said, "Funny Dan would be riding roundup. He never did before."

Brett remained silent. He should have known she wouldn't believe his lie, and he should have known, too, that she'd see Duvane's horse.

"Kind of funny Dan wouldn't be riding his bay, isn't it, Brett? Or did he sell him."

"No," Brett answered.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Don't lie to me, Brett. Dan was drinking, wasn't he?"

He hesitated, feeling the pressure of her body next to his and stirred by it. That was the way it had been before she had left. He had hoped it would be different when she got back, but it wasn't. He should have known. He had taken other girls to dances while she had been away; he had kissed them when he'd brought them home, and he knew he could have his pick of a half dozen ranch girls who lived down river from Wishbone, but the truth of the matter was he wanted none of them.

Brett said, "Yes," looking down at the river.

"Gambling, too?"

Again Brett said, "Yes," eyes still on the river.

"But he knew I was coming." She dropped her hand to her lap and for a moment was silent. Then she said, "You're very kind, Brett. I don't know of any other man who thinks of others as much as you do. Would you tell me something else?"

"Maybe."

"Did Dan try to meet me?"

BRETT took a long breath. She had always been able to dig things out of him that he hadn't wanted to tell her. He said, "Yes, but I talked him into waiting and coming over tonight."

"Dan's stubborn when he's drinking," she said in a low tone. "Just how did you talk him out of it?"

He told her, not wanting to, but unable to think of a way to avoid it. When he finished, she said tonelessly, "You did right, Brett. It would have been disagreeable. Or worse."

She waited a long minute, eyes on the Double D buildings below her. Then the narrow road turned sharply and the ranch was lost to sight. She said, "A girl can't grow up around a bunch of cow hands without learning a few things about men, and there's one I've learned that I'm terribly sure of. Men don't change. Not the ones like Dan. I've got to understand that." She laughed shortly. "I mean, I've got to remember it."

She was wearing Duvane's diamond. Brett had seen that when she'd first stepped down from the coach. When she had calmly announced early in the spring that she was going away to see what was on the other side of the range, Brett had suspected she intended to break with Duvane. She had planned to be gone for a month. She would stay in Denver, she'd said, but she had kept on traveling and the month had become six.

Now she had opened the door for him to tell her how he felt, to tell her that Dan Duvane was a man who would bring her nothing but unhappiness, but he could not. Naco Brown had told Duvane that Brett was trying to steal his girl. Well, he wasn't, no matter how much he loved her. Not as long as she was wearing Duvane's ring. So he said nothing, hating Duvane with a sudden bitter hatred, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing but pull up stakes and ride out. If he stayed, he'd burn his heart out watching what Duvane did to her, and he'd wind up making her a widow.

She said suddenly, "Brett, remember when you first rode into our place in the San Luis Valley? I was just a kid, but I'll never forget how proud you were, even if your clothes were worn out and your saddle was a mess and you were forking the worst looking gray mare I ever saw."

"I didn't have nothing but my pride."

"But it was wonderful to have that. I remember Dad laughed when you asked for a job. He said if you could ride that big roan we had, you could have him. You did, too. It was the best ride I ever saw a man make."

"It was a chance to get a good horse," he said.

He was remembering, too. The boyhood years of drifting, of short jobs here and there, of learning to handle a gun and his fists because he had to, of being hungry more times than not, of Link Moffat slapping him on the back after he'd ridden the roan and saying any man who could ride like that had a job on Wishbone.

There was something else, too. Jill had been boyishly slim then, freckle-faced and a little wild. She'd come up, offering her hand, and said with frank admiration, "That was a good ride, mister. A damned good ride." That was the part he remembered most clearly.

He didn't know when he'd started loving

her. It had grown on him, starting, perhaps, when Jill had discovered she was a woman. She had quit wearing men's clothes and riding with the crew, and once Brett had nearly beaten a man to death who had tried to kiss her, although Jill had been more to blame than the man. But Brett had missed his chance with her, and it had been Link Moffat who had been to blame for making him miss it, for when Brett had told Moffat he was going to ask Jill to marry him, Moffat had laughed like a fool. He'd said, "Wishbone's hers, boy. What have you got to offer?"

So he'd never asked her. He should have, no matter what her father said. They could have run off. They'd have made out. Someway. That is, if she had loved him. But maybe she didn't. Not the way a woman should love a man, or she wouldn't have promised Duvane.

They swung back on the road which dropped in sharp-angled switchbacks from the rim, and for a moment they could see neither the Double D nor the Wishbone buildings. She said, "Stop a minute, Brett."

He pulled the blacks up, puzzled. Without warning him of her intentions, she put her hands around his neck and offered her lips. He kissed her, and the touch of her lips was like an electric shock. For one moment he forgot Duvane; the next he remembered, for she drew back, quite composed.

"Go ahead now, Brett," she said. "That has to do us for a lifetime."

HE drove on, not understanding this at all. There had been a time when she had been a flirt, for she had discovered that a provocative twist of her hips or an inviting smile would bring a man running. But she wasn't that way now. She was twenty and grown up, and she had never flirted with Brett.

The kiss in town might have been a spontaneous action, flowing naturally out of the exuberance of her homecoming, but this kiss was different. She had asked for it as if wanting one sweet memory to cherish throughout her life.

They came down the last pitch, the road leveling out along the river. Then Brett, unable to stand it any longer, burst out, "I love you, Jill. You can have me if you want me. If you don't, well, that's all there is to it, but . . ."

She squeezed his arm, staring ahead at the big cottonwoods that shadowed Duvane's ranch buildings. "Don't, Brett. I know you love me. I've felt it for a long time and it's been wonderful to know, but it's too late now."

"But . . ."

"No. It's too late. I had to go away to think it over. Seemed like I was too close to everything to make a sensible decision. Well, I've had my chance to think about it where I couldn't talk to you or Dad or Dan, and the longer I thought, the more I was convinced that I had to marry him."

"Do you love him?"

"Don't ask me that. There are some good things in Dan and I'll try to make him a good wife." She smiled wryly. "I shouldn't have asked for that kiss. It'll make it harder for both of us."

"There must be some reason," he said slowly. "Something I don't know."

"Yes there is. Try to believe me when I say I think it's what I have to do."

"Then I'd better be moseying along," he said tonelessly.

"I was afraid you would, but I hope you'll change your mind. Dad needs you. He can't work like he used to, and he's got to have a ramrod he can trust."

They forded the river, shallow here just above Duvane's buildings, silver spray splashing out from the horses' hoofs, and wheeled up the sloping bank to the log house that Moffat had built three years ago when they had first come here from the San Luis Valley. It was not a big house, but it was comfortable, here between the red walls of the canyon.

When Jill had been home, there had been flowers and a garden patch and a tiny lawn she had watered with great care. There were none of these things now. It was just a man's ranch, and that's the way it would be after she moved into Duvane's house.

Moffat was waiting for them. He said, a little testily, "Took you a long time."

"I had to look at the scenery," Jill said.

Moffat shrugged, and let it go at that, but after they had carried Jill's valises into

the house, he said, "She's promised to Duvane in case you've forgotten."

The sun was well down in the west now, and dusk would come here to the bottom of the canyon within the hour. Brett faced Moffat, the slanting sun cutting sharply across his high-boned face. He said, "Link, when you've worked for a man for five years, you should have some notion of what he is, but I'm damned if I know what you are."

Moffat's face went rock hard just as it had when he had stood beside Brett in town facing Duvane and Naco Brown. He asked tonelessly, "What are you driving at?"

"You know how I feel about Jill," Brett said hotly. "Looks like I can't have her, but Duvane . . ."

"It ain't you," Moffat cut in. "You ought to savvy that. It's just that Jill's all the family I've got and I want her taken care of."

"Sure. I ain't hollering because you don't want me for a son-in-law. What I'm hollering about is you thinking he'll take care of her."

"He's got a good spread," Moffat said doggedly.

For a moment Brett stared at the older man thinking that Link Moffat might honestly see it this way, but it was more likely the way he was making himself see it. There was something else involved.

"I ain't no prophet," Brett said slowly, "but I'll tell you this. Before Jill's been married to Duvane a year, you'll want to shoot yourself and maybe you will."

Brett walked past Moffat to his horse and stepped up. Moffat said hoarsely, "You're wrong as hell, boy. Dan loves her."

There was no use arguing the matter. Brett said evenly, "I'm riding out tomorrow. Make out my time."

Moffat acted as if he had been struck in the stomach. He put a hand to his heart and bent forward a little, struggling for breath. He said, "No, Brett," in a tone so low that his words barely reached Brett. "You can't do it."

"The hell I can't. You can let Jill make a mistake, but I'm damned if you can make me stay and watch her do it."

Moffat walked toward Brett, still bent forward, right hand clutching his shirt front. He was very pale. Brett had never seen him beg anything of anybody, but he begged now.

"Don't do it, boy. You've done more to make this outfit than I have. I'll double your wages. I'll give you a partnership."

Brett hesitated, thinking how much he owed Link Moffat. Then he shook his head. "I'd better go, Link. I'll kill Duvane if I stay."

"Then do one thing. Stay till we've got our beef down, and we've sold to Van Zandt."

Brett nodded, knowing it would not be more than a week or so. He said, "All right." Reining around, he put his horse across the river and took the road to town.

III

THE sun was nesting atop the La Sals far to the west when Brett rode into Jubilo. He tied in front of the Hoof and Horn and went in. The crowd had thinned, but the poker game was still on, and when Brett walked up to the table, Duvane looked at him, his face hard set.

"Jill home?" Duvane asked.

The man was cold sober. It surprised Brett, for he had expected to find him drunker than he had been earlier in the afternoon. Brett said, "She's home. Let's drift, Dan."

Naco Brown said, "Get out, Fargo. Nobody appointed you Dan's keeper."

"I appointed myself today. I'm clearing out in a week or two, and Dan can drink himself to death or poker away his spread, but tonight he's gonna be sober when he sees Jill."

Two men drifted up to the bar. Brett knew them by name and little else, but they were typical of the toughs who hung around Jubilo. One was Ben Creel, a burly, lewd-minded man with a huge beak of a nose and yellow-flecked eyes. He was a loud talker who bullied anyone he could, and stayed away from the ones he couldn't, the sort of man who was tough when the odds favored him.

The other was Chunk Spain, a younger man than Creel, and a far more dangerous one. He had killed two punchers since he had showed up in Jubilo and been acquitted

both times. Self defense, the juries had said. He was medium tall and slight of build, bald-headed except for a fringe of reddish hair that burred out above both ears; he wore two guns thonged low on his thighs, and his eyes were the pale blue eyes Brett had always associated with killers.

Creel said, "Quite a kissing spree with the Moffat girl, Fargo."

"And maybe more kissing on the way home," Spain said slyly. "I wouldn't like it, Dan, was I you."

Neither man had been in the poker game as far as Brett knew, nor had he thought there was any connection between them and Naco Brown. Now he saw there was, for this was a rigged play. He backed away from the table, trying to watch Creel and Spain, and at the same time keep an eye on Brown at the table.

Duvane got to his feet. He said irritably, "I ain't quarreling with Brett."

"Maybe you'd better be," Creel prodded. "A man sees what he sees if he ain't blind, and it's a cinch Fargo ain't blind the way he was looking at the purty Moffat gal."

Duvane jerked his head at Brett. "Let's drift."

"It's your business," Spain said in his sly voice, "but I can't savvy a man who calls himself a man taking what you're taking off Fargo."

Brett had been watching, waiting for the play to break and not understanding what they were getting at. Naco Brown had tried to kick up a gun-ruckus earlier in the day. Now he sat motionless, dark face expressionless, black eyes pinned on Duvane. It struck Brett then, hard. Naco Brown wanted him dead. If he walked out of here, he'd get a slug in the back, and they'd pin it onto Duvane.

"Wait, Dan," Brett said. "Something stinks around here."

"Sure as hell does," Spain agreed blandly, "and I know where the smell's coming from."

"Yeah," Creel said. "Horse thief. Woman stealer. Same thing. You won't keep your girl if you let this jahoo hang around her."

They had Brett hipped, but Duvane didn't see it. Three of them were too many, and Brown and Spain would be fast. Brett asked, "What's back of this, Brown?"

The gambler leaned forward. "We just aim to stomp Dan's snakes for him. That's all."

"I'll do my snake stomping when the sign's right," Duvane shouted. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"You ain't man enough," Spain said contemptuously. "Shirt and pants, but no man inside."

Duvane grabbed for his gun. Brett shoved against him, saying, "No, Dan." The skinny drunk who had broken up the fight earlier in the afternoon had appeared from somewhere. He reeled against Spain just as the gunman started to draw, throwing his weight against Spain so that he knocked the man down. He said, "Gimme a dollar, mister." He fell, hands out in front of him toward Brown, and as he went down, he somehow managed to upend the poker table in Brown's face, chips and cards cascading over him and sliding on to the floor.

It had been quickly and skillfully done. At once Brett knew it was no accident. The man wasn't drunk at all. Brett had his gun in his hand now. He said, "If you boys are really honing for trouble with me, you can have some, but don't try to pull Dan into it."

Cursing, Spain got to his feet. "I'll kill that whiskey-swilling son of a . . ."

"Shut up." Brett motioned to the drunk. "Get out of here while you're still able to walk."

Brown kicked the table back and stood up, not quite so immaculate as he had been a moment before. His dark eyes remained expressionless, and he said nothing as he moved back warily, eyes flicking from the drunk to Brett and back to the drunk. Spain wasn't smart, but Brown was. Brett sensed that the gambler saw through the drunk's act, but apparently he did not understand it, so he waited.

The drunk was on his feet, still acting his part. "Need a drink. Need a drink awful bad. Got to have a drink."

He reeled out through the batwings. Brett said then, "All right, Dan. Reckon it is time to drift."

Brett backed toward the batwings, gun still palmed. Duvane went out first, then Brett.

He slid sideways, half expecting a bullet to slap through the swinging doors, but none came. He said, "Close, Dan."

"I don't savvy," Duvane said heavily. "I don't think I'm drunk, but I'm damned if I can see through this."

"They want me dead," Brett said, "and looks like they want to hang it on you, but I'm wondering why as much as you are."

"They won't." Duvane handed Brett a five-dollar gold piece. "I've got to get a shave before they lock up the barber shop. Go over to Bellew's and get me a clean shirt, will you?"

"Sure," Brett said, and taking the money, turned toward the store.

BELLEW was busy and Brett had to wait several minutes before he was waited on.

When he stepped back into the street, Naco Brown was standing on the board walk.

He shook his head when Brett stiffened, right hand dropping to gun butt.

"No trouble, Fargo," Brown said quickly. "I've got a deal to offer you."

"I ain't interested in any deal that you've got to offer," Brett said. "That's twice today you've tried to ring up a smoke party for me. Why?"

Brown's lips grinned, but his black eyes remained hard. "I'm not one to show my hole card until I'm ready, Fargo. I said I had a deal."

"I ain't interested." Brett started to move on to the barber shop, and then swung back. "Brown, it strikes me there's a joker running wild in your deck. Who is that drunk?"

"Calls himself Happy Jappert. Been around town a week or so mooching drinks." Brown shrugged. "He won't be around to pull you out of the next hole you fall into. Say, why didn't you stay on roundup?"

"My business," Brett said, starting across the street.

Brown hesitated, then caught up with Brett, short legs taking two steps to his one. "Look at it this way, Fargo. You want the Moffat girl, but you've got a damned poor hand, so Duvane marries her. Then what do you do? Well, it's either stay and think about her sleeping with another man, or ride out. I'm a gambler, Fargo, so I've figured the odds. I'll bet my pile you'll ride out."

Brett stopped in the middle of the street and faced Brown. It had never occurred to Brett that anyone knew how he felt about Jill, or the decision he would be forced to make, but Naco Brown was calling it right. He said, "You know a hell of a lot about my business, friend."

"I figure things out," Brown said complacently. "When Duvane's drunk, he talks, and that helps. Now you ready to listen to my offer?"

"Go ahead."

"All right. You're leaving. Tomorrow. Next week. Next month. Doesn't make any difference to you when, so I'm asking. How much would it be worth for you to pull out tomorrow and stay out."

"Why?"

"Let's say you're in my way. I've got a good thing in Duvane. I don't want to lose it."

"I ain't stopping you from picking your goose."

"You will. I tell you I figure things out and I play the odds. You love Jill Moffat. She marries up with Duvane, but he's losing his shirt to me. You'll do something, Fargo. I don't know what, but you will. That's the kind of a hairpin you are, so it's cheaper for me to get rid of you now. How much?"

"No deal," Brett said, and went on.

Brown caught up with him again and grabbed his arm. "You're no fool, Fargo. I'll get rid of you one way or another. That damned drunk won't ball me up again. Now why don't you . . ."

Brett hit him on the side of the head, a solid blow that put the gambler flat on his back in the street dust. Brett waited, thinking the man would go for his gun, but Brown made no hostile move. He brought a hand to his cheek, feeling of the place where Brett had hit him. He said then, "All right, Fargo. All right."

Brett went on to the barber shop. Duvane was in the front chair, a hot towel over his face.

Brett gave him his change and sat

down. The shop was empty except for the men in the chairs. The window, Brett saw, had not been fixed. He rolled a smoke, trying to figure Brown out and failing. There must, he thought, be more in the man's mind than keeping the poker game with Duvane going.

When the barber had finished with Duvane, he said, "I ain't overlooking the deal you and Link pulled off, but at the same time I've known you fellers a long time, so I'm warning you. Look out for Brown. He's bad medicine."

"Thanks," Brett said, and when Duvane had put on the new shirt, left the shop with him.

They took a booth in the back of the Top Notch Cafe and gave their orders. After Duvane had put down three cups of scalding black coffee, he asked, "What fetched on that fracas with Brown?"

Brett told him, holding back nothing. Their steak came, and Duvane ate hungrily, eyes on his plate. When he was done, he leaned back. "Brett, Link was the one to meet Jill. Why did you leave roundup?"

"Just one reason, Dan. I love her. Brown knew, so I reckon you do. I had a hunch you wouldn't be in no shape to meet her, and I'm damned if I'll let you hurt her before you're married. If I thought it'd break you up, I'd have kept my nose out of it, but Jill's the kind who'll keep her promise regardless."

Duvane reached for his pie. "I'll straighten out when we get married, but that don't excuse me for today. I didn't figure to get drunk. I came in early, aiming to get to the barber shop in time, but Brown met me on the street and talked me into playing a few hands. He set a bottle on the table, and hell, I couldn't let it alone."

Brett leaned forward. "So help me, Dan, if you don't treat her right, I'll . . ."

"I know," Duvane said sullenly. "You're the best man with a gun on Mad River and you'll fill me full of holes. Listen, friend. I love Jill Moffat, too. If I didn't figure I could make her happy, I wouldn't marry her."

Brett pushed his pie back, appetite gone. "I'll get out of the country, Dan. Nothing else to do, feeling like I do about her."

"How many steers are we supposed to deliver to Van Zandt this year?" Duvane asked suddenly.

"A thousand. Why?"

"I just got to thinking. Half Double D and half Wishbone. That's the deal, ain't it?"

Brett stared at the man, wondering if he was completely sober. Duvane knew the agreement as well as he did. He said, "That's it."

Duvane put a hand to his head as if finding it hard to think. "I'm in debt to Brown. A hell of a lot and I don't have the dinero to pay off. I'll need what I get from Van Zandt to get Brown off my neck. Then I'm done with poker and I'll be the best damned husband a woman could ask for. You stay and work for Link. He needs you."

"Don't reckon I'd better," Brett said.

They paid for their meals and went into the street. Ed Stack was coming along the walk, making his rounds as he did every thirty minutes until the small hours of the morning. Brett said, "Wait, Dan." When Stack came up, Brett asked, "How come you let toughs like Creel and Spain stay in town, Ed?"

Stack scowled. "You telling me how to do my job?"

"No. You're a good lawman. That's why I was wondering."

"I ain't so sure he's a good lawman," Duvane growled. "We could do without them hardcases."

"Naco Brown included," Stack said. "I'll tell you something, Duvane. If you ain't got enough backbone to let cards alone, I figure it's your bad luck."

"You're ducking my question," Brett pressed. "Ever look through your reward dodgers?"

"Sure," Stack said testily, "which don't make no difference either way. When I know they're wanted or when they kick up some trouble for me, I'll throw 'em into the jug. Meanwhile, I don't hear you or Duvane offering me a hand."

"We will," Brett said, "soon as roundup's over."

Brett and Duvane walked away, leaving Stack staring after them, worry a heavy weight upon him. Then he turned and went on.

IV

IT WAS completely dark when Brett and Duvane left town. A wind broke across the sage-covered mesa, chill with the promise of winter. They dropped into the canyon and took the twisting road to the river, Duvane saying nothing until they forded the stream. He said then, "Thanks for keeping me away from the stage when Jill got in. Reckon I oughtta say I'm sorry for kicking up a ruckus. I was drunk, which same ain't no excuse."

"It's all right," Brett said heavily.

They rode up the bank to Wishbone, Brett feeling more respect for Duvane than he had ever felt before. It took courage for a man to admit he was wrong; double courage to admit it to the man he knew was in love with the woman he was engaged to.

They reined up in front of the house and stepped down. Brett said, "Go on in. I'll take care of your horse."

"Thanks," Duvane said, and went on toward the house.

The door swung open and lamplight spilled out across the yard in a long yellow pool. Moffat called, "That you, Dan?"

"Sure is," Duvane answered.

"Come in, come in. I'll call Jill."

Brett went on to the corral with the horses, trying not to think of Duvane and Jill, and finding he could think of nothing else. It was like a canker in his mind, and he realized that going away was not the answer. Regardless of the miles he put between him and Mad River, he would never forget Jill. He was trapped and there was no escape.

When he had taken care of the horses Brett walked across the yard to the bunkhouse. He was suddenly very tired. For the first time since he had come to the Mad River range, he felt like getting drunk, so drunk he couldn't think and couldn't dream and couldn't feel the ache that was in every nerve and muscle of his body.

He found a bottle and stared at it a moment, knowing it wasn't the answer, either. There was no answer. That was the hell of it. If Duvane was no good at all, there would be an answer. He'd had his chance to kill the man that afternoon, but he'd played it along until that crazy Happy Jappert had given him an out. He put the bottle back, swearing softly. He could get drunk and forget it, but there would be tomorrow and he would remember.

Moffat came in and Brett wheeled to the door, hand instinctively dipping to gun butt. It dropped away when he saw who it was. Moffat frowned. "Jumpy, ain't you, son?"

"Yeah, jumpy as hell. Dan tell you what happened in town?"

"No."

Brett told him, and asked, "Who do you reckon this Happy Jappert is? Sure wasn't just luck he turned up twice thataway."

Moffat leaned against the door jamb, fishing in his vest pocket for a match. He found it, bit off the end of a cigar, and fired it. "Don't look like it," he said. "Jappert rode through camp 'bout a week ago. That was the night you was helping bring the gather down Pine Canyon and you was late getting in. He ate supper, asked how to get to Jubilo, and rode on."

"Drunk?"

Moffat shook his head. "I figured he was just a saddle tramp." He jerked his head at the house. "Jill wants you to come in."

"I . . ."

"Come on. She's got coffee ready and she made a cake. If you don't come she'll be out here after you."

Brett went, not wanting to but knowing it was the easiest way. Somehow, it didn't seem like Jill. She had a knife in him. Now she was twisting it. No, it wasn't like her.

Brett said nothing while he walked beside Moffat to the house. When they went in Duvane was sitting on the leather couch, balancing a plate and cup of coffee on his lap. He grinned at Brett, nodding at the thick piece of chocolate cake on his plate.

"Jill sure tortures a man," Duvane said. "She gives me this cake and then says I can't eat till you gents get here."

She came out of the kitchen with more cake and coffee, giving the plates and cups to Brett and her father. She had changed to a white dress that fitted her perfectly, accentuating the curves of hips and breasts; her dark hair was brushed straight back and pinned at the base of her neck. Brett lowered his gaze, thinking he had never seen her

more attractive than she was tonight. She'd be living across the river after she married Duvane. If he stayed, he'd see her every day. He couldn't stand that. Not when she was another man's wife.

"Now can I eat?" Duvane demanded.

Jill laughed. "Now you can eat. A body would think you were starved."

"Starved for good cake," Duvane said, and dug in.

There was no sound then but the clatter of forks, of Jill getting up and bringing the coffee pot in. It was a strained silence, and Brett saw that it was bothering Jill. She kept smiling, but it was a frozen smile, not the quick smile that came so easily to her lips. Brett thought dully, *They know it's wrong, all of them, but they won't do anything to change it.*

Brett got up and put his plate on the table. He said, "Thanks, Jill. Reckon I'd better roll in. Got to pull out early."

"Wait," she said, and ran into her bedroom.

She came back a moment later with three boxes in her hands, carefully wrapped in tissue paper and tied with red ribbon. "I brought you some presents." She smiled brightly. "It was the least I could do, the three of you letting me go."

They shuffled uneasily, not knowing what to say. Then Moffat said, "Santa Claus comes early on the Wishbone, don't he?"

"Sure does," Duvane said.

They opened the packages then. A pearl-handled .44 Colt for Moffat, silver spurs for Brett, a silk neckerchief for Duvane.

Silver spurs! Brett stared at them a long moment, hearing Duvane's and Moffat's words of thanks, indistinct words that seemed to flow over a great distance. He forced his eyes to come to Jill's face. She was watching him, only half listening to Duvane and her father, the look on her face of a woman who wanted to please him and was afraid she hadn't.

Brett mumbled, "Thanks," and picking up his spurs, half ran out of the room.

It was a damned lousy world. *She loved him.* He was as sure of that as he was sure of his love for her, but it wasn't enough. Moffat wanted her to marry money. Duvane was smart enough to see how it was with her, but still he'd marry her if he could, satisfied to have half of her heart if he could not have all of it. And Jill had given Duvane her word.

LIFE had been simple enough for the five years Brett had worked for Moffat. A good job, good grub, better than average wages, and Moffat had been an easy man to work for. There had been trouble, sure. The difficult drive over the range. Rustlers. Marauding Utes who drifted back to their old homes. The sullen hatred of the small ranchers down the river who envied Moffat and Duvane their profitable deal with Van Zandt, the Midas City dealer who monopolized the mining camp market, a hatred which had burst into violence more than once.

Those troubles were things a man could get his teeth into, troubles that could be met with fists or guns, but this was something else. There were always ways of getting food when a man was hungry or riding a tough horse or smashing a man into the dust who forced a fight; there was no way to change Moffat or Duvane or Jill. A sense of utter futility washed through Brett. For the first time in his life he was up against something he couldn't lick.

Brett paused outside the bunkhouse door, staring at the silver spurs. Probably Jill had spent a good deal of time looking until she found just the right thing for him. They were expensive, far more expensive than the neckerchief she had given Duvane. He couldn't forget the expectant, almost frightened look she had given him when he had opened the box, nor could he forget the kiss she had begged of him and the way she had said, "That has to do us for a lifetime." What a hell of a thing this was. There would be nothing but unhappiness for all four of them if she married Duvane.

He stepped through the door and tossed the spurs on a bunk, not knowing anyone else was there until a man said, "Howdy, Fargo."

Brett jumped away from the door, jerking gun from holster as the man cried out in quick fear, "Hold it, son. I'm on your side."

It was the pseudo drunk, Happy Jappert, lying on a bunk in a shadowed corner of the room. Brett let his gun slide back into

leather, weak with relief. The fellow didn't know how near he'd come to being a dead man.

"You ain't as smart as I figured you were," Brett said, "sneaking in and hollering this way. I just about plugged you."

Jappert was sitting up now, feet on the floor. "I didn't know how jumpy you were."

Brett came on into the room. Jappert wasn't putting on the drunk act now. He was wearing a clean shirt; he didn't smell of whiskey and tobacco stain was gone from his mouth. He still wore his two-weeks' growth of whiskers, but the air of a shiftless saddle bum was entirely gone. His blue eyes were a little grim; his cotton-white hair was brushed down, and he carried a gun in a low-slung holster on his right thigh.

"You've got some thanks coming," Brett said, "although I'm damned if I know why you horned in twice like you done today."

"Several reasons. The big one was to keep you alive. You might have beaten Naco Brown to the draw the first time, but the second time, hell, they had you."

"How come you're so interested in my health?"

"Reasons for that, too. I wanted a talk with you. I want your help."

Brett sat down on a bunk, studying Jappert. There was a look about the man he liked. Nothing he could lay his hand on. It was just a feeling due, perhaps, to the gratitude he owed Jappert. But there was something else, too, an air of competence that was entirely unassumed, stemming in part at least from the professional manner in which he wore his gun and the level way his eyes met Brett's.

"Go ahead and talk," Brett said.

Jappert rolled a smoke, smiling a little. "Funny how much a man can learn about a new range when he sets his mind to it. You know, Fargo, folks don't think no more of talking in front of a drunk than they do a child. Besides, I'm an expert on listening under open windows and looking through keyholes and such. Dirty business, but it pays."

He fired his cigarette and leaned back. "Funny about how luck gets into things, too. For years I've been looking for your boss. Then, bingo, I ride into his roundup camp and there he is."

Brett stiffened. "What do you want with Link?"

"Now don't blow your top, son. Suppose I figured out a way for you to marry the Moffat girl?"

Brett rose. "Get out."

"Jumpy as a cat with the cramps," Jappert said coolly. "Sit down. Folks talk and I listen. That's all. I didn't get that angle until after you pulled out of town with the Moffat girl. Then the tongues wagged." Jappert shrugged. "Her kissing you helped."

"Damned old gossips," Brett breathed.

Jappert gave him a cynical smile. "Son, you act like you've never been in the cow country before. Small towns are the same everywhere, mining camps, granger towns, cow towns. Folks just like to gab, and it ain't the women who are the worst."

Brett sat down again. "Get your talking done and drift."

"You could be a little more friendly," Jappert said in an aggrieved tone. "I tell you we're on the same side. I stand to make money. You stand to get the girl. Good deal, ain't it?"

"You're gabbing . . ."

"All right," Jappert dropped his cigarette and rubbed his toe across it. "Did you know that Duvane has your boss in the bite?" When Brett didn't answer, Jappert said, "I didn't think so. Well, it's worse than you think. Duvane is a blackmailing crook. It's my guess that's the reason Moffat wants his girl to marry him."

"I'll kill him," Brett said.

"Not if you want her," Jappert said. "If you beef the ornery son, folks will say you done it to get Jill. She might even believe it herself."

Brett said, "Keep talking."

Jappert fashioned another smoke, eyes on the tobacco and paper. "How much did you know about Moffat before you started working for him?"

"Not much. We came here three years ago when the Utes were moved out of this country and I was with him two years before that, but I don't know anything about him before he came to the San Luis Valley."

"Then I'll tell you something. He had a spread on the South Platte before he moved to the San Luis Valley. Three moves in about ten years. Look funny?"

"No. He just wanted more range and he figured he'd get it in a new country. Same reason for leaving the South Platte, I reckon."

Jappert shook his head. "No. He was scared. A man keeps moving when he's scared. You see, Moffat made a mistake when he was young. It's how he got his start. 'Bout fifteen years ago he trailed a Texas herd north to Kansas. He took the dinero when the herd was sold and kept on going."

"I don't believe it," Brett said.

"Makes me no never mind whether you do or not. It happens to be true. Duvane knows. He was in Moffat's crew. That's how he got his hooks into Moffat."

"How did you get into the deal?"

SMOKE curled up around Jappert's eyes, shadowing them. He waited a moment before answering, the cynical smile curling his lips. "It was my dad's herd that Moffat stole. I was too young to go up the trail, but I remember watching them go and I remember how much my dad trusted Moffat, or Johnson as he called himself then. Likewise I know how bad Dad needed that dinero. Cash was damned scarce in Texas those days." He spread his hands. "Well, it broke Dad. He died a few years after that. Since then I've cut sign on Moffat twice, but he's been lucky till this time. He'd moved out just ahead of me."

"What are you fixing to do now?"

"Don't get no ideas about gunning me to save Moffat," Jappert said. "You see, the girl coming back kind o' changes my plans, so I'll walk a little easy. I don't aim to hurt her. She was a little tike the last time I saw her. Eyes like a sparrow and pigtails down her back. I used to think her mother was the prettiest woman in Texas." He grinned wryly. "I've got a soft spot, Fargo, and it's bothering me like hell."

Brett asked. "How do you figure we're on the same side?"

"I want to save Jill all I can for one thing." Jappert rubbed out his cigarette, scratching his cheek. "I'm a bounty chaser, Fargo. The boys I want are holed up in Jubilo. That's why I need your help."

"Who?"

"Brown for one. Creel and Spain. Another one or two. The whole outfit has got ten thousand dollars in reward money out for 'em. The trouble is Ed Stack's hard to convince, and the only sheriff within a hundred miles of here is in Midas City. He wouldn't come to Jubilo if he knew Jesse James was here."

"What do you want me to do?"

Jappert scratched his nose. "I ain't sure yet, but I've nosed around enough to know they've got a big deal on that ties up with you and Duvane and Moffat. We'll wait a day or two to see what's up. Then I want your gun backing me."

"They aimed to beef me today and frame Duvane."

Jappert nodded. "They figure they can handle Duvane and Moffat, but they know you're too tough, so they want you out of the way. And as for Duvane, hell, Brown's into him for twenty thousand. If they can pin your killing onto him, Brown can move in and take Duvane's spread over." He rose. "Well, you stringing along with me?"

Brett's hands fisted. "I've got to be sure about Link."

Jappert shrugged. "Go fetch him. He didn't know me when I saw him in camp or in town today but he'll know me when he sees me with my hat off."

"I'll get him," Brett said. "If you're lying, you're in a tight spot."

Brett left the bunkhouse, holding his steps back to keep from running. It made sense of some things that hadn't looked right. Duvane could be holding this club over Moffat's head. It explained, too, Moffat's reticence about his past.

The lamp was still burning in the living room. Jill and Duvane were on the porch, and when they heard Brett coming, Jill called anxiously, "That you, Brett."

He stopped in the fringe of light. "Yeah, it's me. Where's Link?"

"In bed."

Brett went on into the house. Jill followed, asking, "What is it, Brett?"

"I've got to see him. I'll get him. Go on back."

She stopped beside the table, staring after him. Duvane stood behind her, his big body filling the doorway. Brett went on into the bedroom. He shook Moffat's shoulder, saying, "Wake up, Link."

Moffat stirred, "What the hell . . . ."

"Wake up. There's a fellow out here who wants to see you."

"I'll talk to him in the morning."

"It won't wait. He says he used to know you."

Moffat sat upright, suddenly awake. "Who is he?"

"Dunno. Says you'll know him."

Moffat got up and pulled on his pants. He buckled his gun belt around him, his breathing labored. He said, "All right," and left his bedroom, Brett following.

Jill was still standing beside the table, very pale now. "I wish you'd tell me, Brett."

"Nothing to tell you yet."

They went on out of the room, Duvane asking, "Anything I can do?"

"Keep Jill here," Brett said, and hurried after Moffat who was running across the yard.

Brett was a step behind Moffat when he went into the bunkhouse. Jappert stood by the table. His hat was on his head now, and the yellow lamplight falling directly on his thin, stubble-covered face. Moffat stopped, panting.

"Hell, it's the drunk. What's the idea, Brett, getting me up?"

Jappert took off his Stetson and ran a hand through his cotton-white hair. "Remember Cotton Top, Johnson?"

Moffat froze. He sucked in a ragged breath and began to tremble. Then he took one step, hand clutching his shirt front, and toppled forward on his face.

V

FOR a moment Brett stared at the fallen man. Then he lunged forward, and stooping, turned Moffat over. He was alive, but little more. Brett wheeled to the door, calling, "Jill!"

She came running, Duvane lumbering behind her. The instant she saw her father, she cried, "His heart! Oh Brett, I should have told you."

Brett knew he should have guessed. Moffat was never one to talk about his aches and pains, but he had been taking it easy lately and that wasn't like him. Brett remembered, too, the way Moffat had put his hand to his chest and struggled for breath when Brett had told him to figure his time.

Jill looked up at Brett, her eyes accusing. "What did you tell him to have this happen?"

"I didn't tell him anything."

Brett glanced at Jappert who had put his hat back on his head. Jappert, he thought, did not want Duvane to recognize him yet. For a moment Brett hesitated, knowing that Jill would ask Jappert what he'd said and wondering if the bounty chaser would tell her. But he couldn't wait to see. He said, "I'll get the doc," and left the bunkhouse.

By the time Brett reached the rim, a moon had climbed into the sky, its pale light silvering the sage-covered mesa. Jubilo was just ahead. Brett thundered into town, hoping that Doc Hazen was here. His office was dark. So, too, were the windows in the back.

Brett reined up in front of the Hoof and Horn and went in. The saloon was crowded again as it had been in the afternoon, and it took a moment for Brett, standing just inside the bat wings, to see that the medico was not in sight. He went on to the mahogany, asking the barkeep, "Where's Doc?"

"Back room. Big game going on. I don't reckon he'll leave."

"He'll leave," Brett said, and swung away.

"Brett." The barman leaned across the mahogany, worried gaze sweeping the crowd and returning to Brett who had turned back. He said softly, "Watch it, son. Brown's in the game."

"Thanks," Brett said, and went on along the bar to the back room.

He went in without knocking. Doc Hazen sat with his back to the door, huddled forward on his chair. Brown and Chunk Spain were both in the game. So was the storekeeper Bellew and a couple of small ranchers from down the river.

Bellew said, "Howdy, Brett." Doc Hazen and the ranchers nodded, but neither Brown nor Spain gave any greeting.

"Link's bad sick, Doc," Brett said. "His heart, Jill says."

"Then there's no use of Doc riding out there," Brown said. "Get to hell out of here, Fargo."

"He was alive when I left. If you hurry

it up, maybe you can do something for him."

"Sure." Hazen rose. "I've lost enough for tonight anyhow."

Brown laid his cards down, his movements slow and precise. "Fargo, you've been getting into my way pretty regular lately."

Spain scooted his chair back, eyes on Brett, watching for a fast move.

Hazen said, "Saddle my horse, Brett," and went out.

Ed Stack had come in. He asked. "Trouble, Brett?"

"Brown's fixing to make some. Maybe we'd better get it over with."

"No," Stack said.

Brown laughed. "All right. We'll wait, but I'm not forgetting you hit me. I'll tell you one thing, Fargo. Sometime I'll catch you when there isn't a drunk or the law for you to hide behind."

"Then you'll hang," Stack said.

"You'd hang me for drilling a man in a fair fight, Ed? What kind of law do you give this burg?"

Stack said nothing. Brett hesitated, fighting his pride, but the urgency of the moment was too great to permit him to waste time here. He said, "Later, Brown," and wheeled out of the room. Ben Creel, he saw, was not in sight.

The doctor kept his horse in the livery at the other end of the block. Brett rode to it, stepped down, lifted the saddle to the back of the medico's mount and was tightening the cinches when Hazen came through the archway, his black bag in hand. They mounted, Brett asking, "You knew about Link's heart?"

"I knew all right, but I haven't done him any good. Hell, a man like Link Moffat don't listen until it's too late."

They were in the middle of the street when the shot came, a tongue of flame ribboning out from the vacant lot beside the west wall of the stable, the report slamming against the false fronts. Brett felt the white heat of the slug along his back. Another shot racketed out before the echoes of the first had died. The second was a close miss, for Brett had dropped low in the saddle, and wheeling his horse toward the dry gulcher, cracked steel to him.

A third shot ripped out from the shadowed darkness and missed. Then the buckskin was across the boardwalk. Brett's gun was in his hand. He threw a shot at the vague figure of a running man, and thundered on along the wall of the livery into the alley. He was in the moonlight now. Glimpsing the man trying desperately to reach the feed corral back of the stable, he fired again, this time bringing the man down in a stumbling fall. Brett reined up beside him and swung down. It was Ben Creel.

Brett waited as men raced across the vacant lot and came to him, Ed Stack in the lead.

"Creel," Brett said.

The marshal knelt beside the fallen man and immediately rose. "Dead."

"You can tell Brown not to send a boy to do a man's chore," Brett said.

"What's Brown got to do with this?" Stack asked.

NEITHER Brown nor Chunk Spain were in the crowd. Brett turned away and mounted. Stack said sharply, "You've settled this, and I've got no call to hold you, but if Naco Brown has anything to do with it, I want to know."

Brett looked down at the lawman, knowing he had no proof, and that Ed Stack was not a man to do anything until he had to. "Just a hunch, Ed," Brett said, and rode into the street.

Brett caught up with the medico before he reached the rim and told him what had happened.

"Won't be many tears wasted over that coyote," Hazen said. "Didn't know whether I ought to go back or not."

"Creel don't need you and I can wait till we get to Wishbone."

They started into the canyon, neither wanting to talk. Later, as they splashed across the river, the doctor said with deep bitterness, "I've lived in the West all my life and I'm getting tired of patching bullet holes. Strikes me as being damned queer a country can't be settled without the trouble that always goes with it."

The door of the house was open. Jill stood there, a slim figure silhouetted against the light. She called, "Hurry, Doc."

Hazen swung down in front of the

house. "Reckon you'll need me more'n Link. Come on."

The medico tramped into the house. Brett tied the horses and followed, the bullet gash aching with dull throbs. Duvane was not in sight, but Jappert sat on the leather couch, grave eyes on Brett. He asked, "What happened?"

"Creel missed. He won't be trying again."

Jappert swore. "Then I reckon I won't be getting no reward money on him."

"I don't want it. Where's Duvane?"

"Gone home."

It was just as well, Brett thought. There was enough trouble now without jumping Duvane. Jill and the medico came out of the bedroom, Hazen shaking his head. "Nothing I can do for him, Jill. Keep him quiet if you can, and don't expect a miracle. Now let's take a look at you, Brett."

Jill stood watching while Brett took off his shirt and Hazen washed and bound the wound. Brett could not tell whether Jappert had told her about her father. She was very pale and she looked as if she had been crying.

When Brett put his shirt on, she asked, "Is it bad?"

"Just a scratch." Hazen motioned to Brett. "Get out, both of you. Nothing you can do in here."

They left the house, Brett asking, "Does Jill know?"

"I didn't tell her. Funny, ain't it? All this time I've been thinking what I'd do to Moffat when I caught up with him, and now he's flat on his back."

"You wouldn't do anything anyhow, would you?"

Jappert didn't answer until they reached the bunkhouse. Then he said, "Maybe I wouldn't at that. I can't change what's happened, and I've seen a lot of men spend a lifetime trying to get square with somebody who done 'em dirt, but hell, all they do is to curdle their innards so they can't enjoy nothing. I don't want to do that."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I aim to collect the bounty I came here to get. Far as Moffat goes I guess his conscience has given him plenty of hell. His heart sure kicked up when he recognized me. Maybe I'll just let it go at that."

"Looks like too much luck, you finding Link here along with Naco Brown and the bunch you wanted."

"No, it wasn't too much luck. I had a tip that Brown's outfit was holed up here. They ain't wanted in Colorado, you know, so they figured they had a good hideout." He rolled a smoke, his eyes thoughtful. "With Moffat it was just a case of finding a new country and staying till it settled up. In another year or so he'd have moved on."

"I've got my own reason for settling with Brown," Brett said. "I'll give you a hand soon as we've delivered the cattle to Van Zandt."

"Keep mum or they'll duck out." Jappert rose and walked to the door. "How soon are you supposed to deliver the cattle?"

"Monday."

"There's another man in the outfit who ain't around town," Jappert said thoughtfully. "Calls himself Sam Inman. I've studied the way this bunch works and I think I've got 'em figured. Brown's the brains but Inman fronts for 'em. One reason I've been holding off is to see if Inman will show. I've got a hunch he will on Monday." He stepped outside and then swung back to say, "Tell Moffat I ain't going to worry him none till he's on his feet." He nodded and disappeared into the darkness.

Brett pulled off his boots and blew out the lamp. He lay down, bone-weary, believing at last what Jappert had said about Link Moffat. But his thoughts always returned to Jill and Dan Duvane, and still he could not see what he should do. Jill's loyalty to her father was both fine and foolish, and unalterable, but one thing was clear to Brett now. Dan Duvane was even less man than Brett had thought.

BRETT slept a few hours, and from long habit, woke at dawn. He would have ridden out at once, waiting to eat until he reached camp, but Jill came out of the house as he was saddling his buckskin and told him she had breakfast ready. He went to the house with her reluctantly because it would have been easier not to see or talk to her now, but he saw at once that she was determined. If he left

without breakfast, it would only mean an argument.

Doc Hazen had spent the night in the house. He ate with them, the lamp on the table throwing its yellow light across the kitchen, the big room filled with the rich fragrance of coffee and bacon. Jill rose and took another pan of biscuits from the oven, filled their cups, and sat down again.

"I'm sure sorry it had to be like this the first night you got home," Brett said.

"I'm sorry, too," Jill said.

Brett drank his coffee, sensing that she didn't want to talk. From the first day he had started work for Link, he had known that Jill's relationship with her father was very close. That was the only way Brett could explain her determination to marry a man she did not love, and he was certain she did not love Dan Duvane.

The medico rose and said he'd have a look at Link. When he was gone, Jill leaned forward, brown eyes fixed on Brett. She asked, "What happened last night?"

Brett canted his chair back against the wall and rolled a smoke. He had been sure she would ask and he had not decided what he would say. It was one reason he had wanted to ride out without seeing her. She was paler than he had ever seen her before, and she must be very tired. There was none of the sparkling radiance that he had always admired so much in her. She still wore the white dress she had put on the evening before. It was badly wrinkled, and her hair was not as neatly pinned as usual. Probably, Brett thought, she had spent the night beside her father's bed, punished by her thoughts, and hating the years she saw ahead.

"I ain't real sure," Brett said at last. "Seems that Jappert knew your dad a long time ago. Link just took a look at him and keeled over."

He fired his cigarette, chair still canted back against the wall, the blue smoke shadowing his face. The sun was just beginning to show above the San Juan range now, the thin morning light washing in through the east windows.

Jill was running a finger across the oil cloth on the table, staring blankly in front of her. She said finally, "I've always known there was something wrong, but Mother died when I was too young to be told, and Dad would never talk about it. I shouldn't have gone away. He's always leaned on me just like he's leaned on you." She looked up at him then, pleading. "If he lives, you'll stay, won't you?"

"For awhile anyhow," he said.

She tried to smile but her lips wouldn't obey. She said simply, "Thank you, Brett."

He rose. "I've got to git." He moved to the door and stopping there, turned back. "Jill, did Duvane try to make you set a date?"

"Yes, but I can't marry him now, of course. He understands."

Brett felt the quick rush of relief. He opened the door and was half through it when Hazen came into the kitchen. He said, "Link wants to talk to you, Brett."

Brett turned back. "I didn't figure he was able to."

"He's not," the medico said, "but he's better off talking than lying there fretting."

There was no way out of it. Brett walked through the kitchen into the living room, hoping he would find the right thing to say and afraid he would not. Hazen had raised the shades, and now the early sun was throwing its slanted rays across the bed. Moffat lay on his back, very pale, looking as much like a dead man as he could and still be alive.

"That you, Brett?"

Moffat spoke in a whisper so that Brett had to bend over him to hear. "Yeah, it's Brett."

"Cotton Top told you?"

"Yes. He said he wouldn't worry you till you got back on your feet."

"I took ten thousand. I ain't excusing myself, but there's one thing I want you to know. We were poor. You never knew anybody as poor as we were. I couldn't stand to see my wife and Jill live like that, but taking the money didn't help. It was five years before I could settle down and send for 'em. I kept on the run all that time."

Slowly Moffat turned his head, staring up at Brett. He asked, "You'll take care of Jill?"

"I'll stay for awhile."

Moffat closed his eyes. "I know what you're thinking. A man has to get mighty

damned low to want his girl to marry Duvane, but I couldn't stand her knowing. She knew about my bad ticker and how it kicked up when she crossed me. That's the reason she agreed to marry him. She . . . she don't know, does she?"

"No."

"Duvane was going to tell her if she didn't marry him. I . . . I think he really loves her."

"She won't be happy with him," Brett said.

Moffat lay motionless for a moment, limp hands on top of the covers. He said then, "Yes, I think he loves her. If he does, he'll do everything he can to make her happy. I can't let her know, Brett. She believes in me. I just can't let her know."

"Take it easy, Link," Brett said. "I'll have the herd down by Monday."

"I'll be all right. Everything will be all right if you stay."

"I'll be around," Brett said, and left the bedroom.

Brett went out through the front door. As he rode away he saw that Jill was standing behind the house, watching him. She waved, and he raised a hand to her. Then he was hidden in the close-growing scrub oak.

VI

IT TOOK the rest of the week to finish the gather and cut out the steers that were to be delivered to Van Zandt. There were still a few wildies scattered through the scrub oak atop the mesa, mossyhorns that had a talent for crawling into a hole and remaining motionless so that a rider could go by within a few feet without seeing them. They could go another year, for now Brett had neither time nor men to hunt them, and he had enough steers to satisfy the agreement with Van Zandt.

The cows and calves and young steers would winter in a big park directly above the ranch. There was good grass and the weather would not be too severe at the lower altitude. The park was one reason Moffat had settled here, for it was protected by a circle of hills that would take the edge off the January storms.

They reached the river with the trail herd Sunday night, the chuck wagon bumping down the steep grade over a road that was hardly a trail, pans rattling a warning that it was on the way. Duvane was waiting, a wide grin on his red face, and when he saw Brett, he rode over to him.

"Right on the nose," he said. "Van Zandt's in town, wanting to know where in hell you were, but I told him he could quit worrying about you."

"Link?" Brett asked.

"Still kicking. That old rooster's too tough to die. Jill's been putting me off on account of him, but hell, he'll live to be a hundred."

Brett stared down at the man, hating him. The man had fooled him, and he cursed himself for his own blindness. He had thought Duvane was like a hundred other men he had known, basically decent, but given to a weakness for whiskey and poker. Now he knew there was very little in Dan Duvane that could be called decent, or he would not have used his knowledge of Moffat's thievery as a lever to force Moffat to favor him in courting Jill.

"Got your herd in?" Brett asked tonelessly.

"You bet. The boys fetched 'em down yesterday. Van Zandt's been out to see 'em. Says they'll do. He's got his hay put up, so he'll feed same as he did last year." Duvane shook his head enviously. "Sure got a sweet deal, that Dutchman. He'll double his money before spring. Them miners have to eat and Van Zandt's got the beef."

"Has he talked price yet?"

Duvane looked surprised. "No, but he gave us fifty dollars a head last year. Nothing's changed, has it?"

"Not that I know of, but Van may think of something."

"He'd better not," Duvane said, scowling. "I've got to have twenty-five thousand to pay my hands and get Brown off my neck."

"I'll go see Link," Brett said, and turned his buckskin up river toward the house.

Jill saw him and ran across the yard, calling, "I knew you'd be down in time, Brett. Dad's been worrying."

Brett stepped down, wondering about

that, for Link Moffat was not a man to voice his worries. "I'll go tell him he can quit worrying," Brett said. "How is he?"

"Better, I guess."

For a moment they faced each other, the old hunger in Brett for this slim, dark-eyed girl. She seemed rested and some of the old eagerness for living that had always been a part of her was here again.

For a moment the genuine pleasure that Jill felt in seeing Brett brought the familiar sparkling radiance to her, then it was gone. The color fled from her cheeks, her smile faded. He turned toward the house, asking, "Duvane been over?"

"Every night." She walked beside him, adding with a trace of bitterness, "He promised to quit drinking."

Brett sensed that Jill did not believe Duvane would keep his promise. He asked, "Haven't set a date?"

"No."

He stopped, turning to face her. "Don't, Jill. It isn't just that I love you. It's crazy for you to throw your life away just because Link wants you to."

"It's a little more than that now, Brett," she said tonelessly. "Doc's been out to see Dad every day. He says Dad may live a long time, but he won't be able to work and another shock will finish him."

So now it was her father's life as well as his pride, but it still wasn't enough. Turning, he went on into the house, wishing that Link Moffat was dead and hating himself for the wish.

Moffat called querulously, "That you, Brett?"

"It's me," Brett answered, and walked into the bedroom.

The light was very thin in the room, and Moffat said, "Light the lamp."

Brett thumbed a match to life and touched the flame to the wick. As he replaced the chimney, Moffat asked, "Got 'em down?"

"All but a few mossyhorns who may get hungry before spring, but we've got plenty of good steers to satisfy your contract."

HE WALKED to the bed. Moffat looked more like himself, but he was still a sick man with none of the affable mannerisms that had always been a part of him. He's afraid to die, Brett thought, and ashamed to live.

"Looks like you done a little brush popping," Moffat said.

Brett grinned, putting a hand to his face where an oak limb had left its mark. "A little. Seen Van Zandt?"

"No, he ain't been out, but Dan says he's in town."

"Suppose he don't pay the price he gave us last year?"

"Settle for the best deal you can, but I reckon he'll pay. He always struck me as being on the square."

"Well, we'll find out in the morning. Just wanted you to know we had 'em down."

"Thanks. I was worried some. Dan says Van is a mite impatient. Wants to start 'em up the river soon as he settles up."

"They'll be on top in the morning," Brett said, and walked out.

Jill was waiting outside. She said, "That Jappert hasn't been back. I could kill him for what he did to Dad."

She wouldn't say that if she knew, Brett thought. For an instant he wondered if it would be better if she did know. It might clear everything up. But if she found out it would have to be from someone else. He said, "I'll be back with the dinero soon as I get it," and walked on to his horse, thinking that once there had been a Texas rancher who had expected Link Moffat to return under similar circumstances.

Duvane was gone when Brett rode back to the camp. He ate supper with the crew and for a time hunkered beside the fire staring at the flames. He thought of the five years he had been with Link Moffat, of Jill who had become a woman in those years, of his love for her. Five years on one job, years that had flowed along like the steady run of a river, a pleasant river, shadowed by willow thickets, now and then touched here and there by a sun that brought to life a million diamonds where it washed around a rock or rushed down a swift riffle to slow again in a deep clear pool.

Any river may reach a break and spill over in sudden violence. The river of Brett Fargo's life had reached that place. Tomorrow the break would come. If there was no trouble, the herd would be delivered to Van Zandt at noon on the mesa south of Jubilo, Brett would bring the money back,

and the promise he had made to Link Moffat would be kept. After that—.

A cow hand drifted in, saying, "Somebody's coming, Brett."

Brett rose. "Van Zandt maybe."

But it was Dan Duvane on his big bay, saying in his cheerful tone, "Thought I'd drop back again before I called on Jill. I think we'll get married next week. Link ought to be able to stand a wedding by then." He laughed. "Reckon you'll want to be there, too."

Brett had started to roll a smoke. Now he threw it into the fire, suddenly struck by something he should have seen a long time before, but until he had talked to Jappert, he had not understood Link Moffat or Dan Duvane, or their relationship. They were both weak and they were proud, and it was Duvane's pride which brought him back now to taunt Brett. Duvane must have known from the first that he did not have Jill's love; he had been humiliated the day she had returned. He had passed off Brown's and Spain's talk about Brett stealing his girl and being kissed by her. Now, in a sly way, he was reminding Brett that regardless of whom Jill loved, she was marrying him.

"You'll never marry Jill," Brett said.

Duvane grinned, glancing across the fire at the cook and a couple of Wishbone hands who stood watching. He brought his gaze back to Brett, red-veined face still holding the pleasant mask he habitually wore. He said, "Want to bet on that, son?"

"No. I'm just telling you. Maybe you haven't heard about a visit we had from a fellow you and Link used to call Cotton Top."

Duvane straightened, right hand dropping to gun butt. He asked hoarsely, "What'd he tell you?"

"All of it, I guess. Now I reckon it's time for me to buy into the game. I figure that a two-legged critter who would put the bite on a man like you have on Link is a brother to a rock snake."

For a moment Duvane sat motionless, right hand still gripping gun butt, his lips tightly pressed. "You'd like for me to pull, wouldn't you?" he said.

"It would be the easiest way of settling this."

"You mean the easiest way of stealing the woman who's promised to me. You're faster with a gun than I am, Fargo. You know that, but you ain't taking any chances. You've got three men backing you. I ain't sucking in, mister."

"My men aren't in this, Duvane. It's just me and you."

"If it's you and me, it'll come later. Sometime when there's just the two of us." A thin grin touched his lips. "But you still won't win, Fargo. If you beef me, everybody'll know why. I don't reckon that folks will cotton to the notion of you killing a man to get his woman."

He reined around and rode away. Brett, staring after him, thought of Jappert saying almost the same thing, that if he beefed Duvane, folks would think he did it to get Jill, that she might even believe it herself. Duvane was counting on that to save his life, but it wouldn't work. Brett might lose Jill, but that wasn't as important as keeping Jill from marrying a man like Dan Duvane.

One of the riders said, "Looks like you just gave trouble a kick in the pants, Brett."

"Yeah, that's just what I did," Brett said irritably, "but it's my trouble. If you . . ."

"Why now," the man said with some sharpness, "your trouble's our trouble. I never thought much of Duvane myself."

VII

IT WAS hardly dawn when the Wishbone crew ate breakfast. A chill wind swept up the canyon, presaging the winter that lay a few weeks ahead. The men caught up their horses, saddled, and mounted, and had the cattle across the river before the first vagrant gleams of sunlight touched the water. They were pushed up the narrow road to the rim, a long line of red backs, the sun high enough now to wipe the night shadows from the canyon and to glint on the tips of the steers' horns like the points of a thousand curved bayonets.

The last steer was on the mesa before noon. Van Zandt was there on the rim, waiting, a pot-bellied man who sat his saddle like a stuffed wool sack, broad-brimmed Stetson setting high on his big head. The deal which had been worked out the year

before was his idea. He had promised to pay a top price for a thousand head, frankly admitting that he had succeeded in monopolizing the market in the San Juan camps.

He could, Van Zandt said, drive a herd in from New Mexico, or possibly pick up enough steers from the small ranchers downstream, but it was less trouble to deal with Moffat and Duvane. They were close. They had enough cattle to supply his needs. And it simply added up to less fuss than worrying with a bunch of small fry who might not have the number he needed.

It had been a good deal the year before, and Moffat and Duvane had contracted to supply him again this fall, but no price had been agreed upon. Van Zandt had argued that he had no way of knowing what conditions would be a year ahead. If someone drove cattle into the San Juan, he might suddenly find himself in a price-cutting war.

Now, riding toward the cattle dealer as the herd strung out across the mesa, Brett could not help wondering what the price would be this year. He had told Moffat a month before that it would be smart to pin Van Zandt down before it was too late to ship to Denver by rail, but Moffat had shrugged it off. "Van Zandt's all right," he'd said. "Hell, even if the price is down, we'll do better than paying freight." But Moffat was in no condition to bargain, and that put it up to Brett, a job he had no liking for.

The cattle dealer raised a pudgy hand in greeting as he asked, "How are you, Fargo?"

"All right." Brett dropped the bandanna from his face and slapped the red trail dust from his clothes. "Heard you were on hand."

"Got to Jubilo two days ago. Duvane brought his herd in yesterday. Hoped you'd do the same."

"Today's the day," Brett reminded him.

"So it is, so it is. How's Link?"

"Sick."

"Sorry to hear that. Damned sorry. Hope ain't serious."

"Damned serious. It's his heart."

"Now that's too bad, but he's lucky to have a good man like you to handle his business for him."

Brett reined in beside the Dutchman. Van Zandt was that way, polite and sympathetic to the point of being gushy. Brett never fully trusted a man who could turn on a fine flow of words that easily, but so far he had no grounds to mistrust the man. Thinking about it now, he realized that the uneasiness which was in him rose from Jappert saying that Naco Brown and Chunk Spain had a big deal on involving Moffat and Duvane. But Jappert had had no idea what it was, and it might have nothing to do with the cattle dealer.

They rode in silence a moment, angling south beside the slowly moving herd. Van Zandt said finally, "They're in fine shape. You must have had good grass this summer."

"Wildhorse is always good," Brett said. "Want to make your count this afternoon?"

"No, I'll take your word for it. I'd like to get them started soon as I settle up with you and Duvane."

"What's the price?" Brett said bluntly.

"Low," Van Zandt said. "Damned low. Duvane's in town now. We might as well ride in and get down to brass tacks."

It had been that way the year before. Moffat and Duvane had bargained with the dealer for an hour before they had agreed on a price. Perhaps it would be the same this time. Still, the uneasiness grew in Brett. Van Zandt had not looked closely at the herd; he had not wanted to make a count. Last year he had done both.

They turned toward town, setting a brisk pace. Brett glanced at the dealer's flabby face, but there was no reading it. They came into Jubilo, Van Zandt reining up in front of the Hoof and Horn. He said, "Duvane's in the back room. We'll get a bottle and join him."

Stepping down, Brett said, "Dan's probably got a bottle."

Van Zandt laughed as he racked his horse. "I expect he has."

Brett and Van Zandt pushed through the batwings, the cattle dealer swinging toward the bar and picking up a bottle. There were not many men in the saloon. One poker game was going in the back. Doc Hazen was having a drink with the storekeeper, Bellew. Two others, strangers to Brett, were bellied up against the ma-

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hogany, pretending to drink while they covertly watched the batwings.

Brett wondered about them, for they had the owlhoot brand stamped upon them as clearly as Chunk Spain had. Still, it was nothing to be concerned about, for tough hands had been riding through Jubilo from the day John Bellew had first opened his store. It was far more peculiar that Naco Brown and Chunk Spain had tarried instead of drifting on as most of the rough element had done.

Van Zandt waved the bottle at Brett. "Come on."

They threaded their way through the poker tables, Brett noting that neither Brown nor Spain was in sight. Ed Stack, the marshal, was not in the saloon, either.

"How's Link?" Doc Hazen called.

"Seemed pretty good last night," Brett said.

Hazen nodded. "Can't tell about a bad ticker. He might be dead now, and he might go for years."

Van Zandt opened the door of the back room and went in. He said, "Howdy, Dan." Then Brett was inside and the cattle dealer closed the door. Brett stood motionless, surprise shocking him. Naco Brown and Chunk Spain sat with their chairs canted back against the wall, Brown's dark face expressionless, Spain's pale eyes faintly mocking.

Brett swung to face Van Zandt. "What are these two in here for?"

Duvane grinned, slack-lipped. The bottle in front of him was almost empty. He said, "Sit down, Wishbone. Old Van's paying off."

"What are they doing here?" Brett asked again.

VAN ZANDT set his bottle on the table, placed his hat beside it, and dropped into a chair. "I've taken on a couple of partners, Fargo. Reckon it don't make no never mind to you. The money's good whether it comes from me or the three of us."

"Sure." Duvane made an expansive gesture with his right hand. "You've got your beef, and I'm getting married. Pay off." He gave Brett his slack-lipped grin. "You ain't smart, Brett. Neither is them two." He jerked a thumb at Brown and Spain. "They was gabbing about you stealing my girl. You tried like hell, but nobody steals Dan Duvane's girl. I wipe out my gambling debts today and I quit whiskey." He made a decisive motion with his hand. "Just like that. Then we get married tomorrow. Fixed it up last night."

Van Zandt took an envelope from his pocket. "Sit down, Fargo. Have a drink on me. No use wasting time . . ."

"I ain't done talking," Duvane said loudly. "This is my day to howl. Fargo there has been trying to grab my girl. Met her when she got in and kissed her, by damn. Hear that, Van? Took her home. Kissed her some more, I reckon. Then she gave us some presents. Silver spurs for him, and right purty ones, but you know what she got me? A damned old rag she could have bought in Bellew's store."

Brown rose and came to the table. "Let Fargo stand if he wants to, Sam. We've got to get that herd moving."

It was wrong, all wrong. Whatever difference Duvane and Brett had should be forgotten now, but Duvane was too drunk on both whiskey and hate to see how it was stacking up. Naco Brown had failed the day Jill had come home, but he was pulling it off now. It would take very little to make Duvane draw on Brett.

Van Zandt opened the envelope and spread some scraps of paper on the table. "I'm taking your word, Duvane, that you have delivered five hundred head. Same with you, Fargo. Now market conditions in Midas City are bad. Other dealers are moving in on me and I'll be lucky if I don't lose my shirt."

"How much?" Brett demanded.

Van Zandt licked his lips and threw a quick glance at Brown. Spain was on his feet now, smiling faintly. Duvane tipped his bottle, emptied it, and set it down with a bang. "Yeah, how much, Van?"

"Twenty dollars a head," Van Zandt said.

"Nothing doing," Brett said, and turned to the door. "We'll winter our steers and go broke if we have to, but we ain't giving 'em to you."

"Don't go away," Spain said softly.

"I told you before you've got in my way too many times," Brown said. "It would have been simpler if Ben had shot straight

the other night, or if my plans had worked that afternoon, but my luck was bad. It's better now. I'm holding a pat hand, Fargo."

Brett swung back. He'd get a slug if he walked out and they'd pin it on Duvane just as Brown had planned to do the other time, but this time Jappert wasn't around to spoil the play.

"They tell me you're purty fast," Spain said. "I always like to find out, one way or the other when I run into a gent with your reputation, Fargo."

Duvane hit the table with the palm of his hand. "Come on, Van. Quit augering and pay off."

"Tell him, Sam," Brown said.

Brett didn't know what Van Zandt's first name was, but he was remembering something now. Jappert had said there was another man in the outfit who fronted for them named Sam Inman. It could be that Van Zandt was Inman. He had played it square the year before, setting up the deal for the big steal this fall.

"Yeah, go ahead and tell him, Inman," Brett breathed.

The cattle buyer jumped to his feet as if he'd been stung, his chair crashing to the floor. He grabbed for his gun, moving with surprising speed for a fat man.

"No," Brown yelled, gripping Inman's right wrist. "Not yet."

For a moment the buyer faced Brett, breathing hard. He asked, "How'd you get onto me?"

"I'm onto all of you," Brett told him. "There's ten thousand dollars reward money on you. I reckon that's dead or alive, ain't it?"

"You won't tell . . ." Spain began.

"Not yet, you fool," Brown cried. "Damn it, we've got too big a thing to blow it now. You'd better talk, Fargo. How could a cowhand find out who we are?"

Duvane pounded the table again. "I want my money."

Brown hit him with the back of his hand. "Shut up."

Duvane got to his feet. "You don't hit . . ."

Brown hit him again, this time with his fist, and Duvane stumbled back against the wall and stayed there, cursing and wiping blood from his mouth.

"It don't make no difference whether I tell what I know or not," Brett said. "There's a bounty chaser in town who's been after you boys for a long time. He's been waiting till Inman showed up."

"JAPPERT," Brown murmured. "I had a hunch about that hombre acting like a drunk while he messed things up." He wheeled to face Inman. "We're not running, Sam. There's a hundred thousand in this and by damn, we'll play it out and collect. Get the bill of sale out of 'em."

"All right, Duvane." Inman spread the slips of paper across the table. "Here are your I. O. U.'s. Twenty thousand. At twenty dollars a head, your beef gets you half out of the hole. What'll you do about the other ten thousand?"

Duvane straightened, one hand still held to his mouth. The blow had partly sobered him. He stared at Inman a moment before he said, "I haven't got it."

"You could get it."

"How?"

"A bill of sale from Moffat for his herd would square you."

Brown nodded. "Get moving. Fargo stays here."

"Don't do it, Dan," Brett cried. "This bunch are outlaws. They can't collect a dime on those I. O. U.'s."

"Dan," Brown said, "you're too smart a man to believe anything Fargo says. All he's trying to do is to get you into trouble. Just remember one thing. Everything he does is aimed at getting your girl."

Duvane scowled at Brett. "Yeah, I ain't forgetting. Tried to work me into a fight last night so he could drill me, but I was too smart for him."

Duvane started for the door. Brown jerked his head at Spain. Nodding, the gunman followed. Brett shouted, "Damn it, Dan, we're into this together."

"Before you go off half-cocked, Fargo," Brown said, "take a look at the window."

Brett had been close to drawing. Even with the odds stacked against him, it was better to make his try here than let Duvane go, but one glance at the window changed his mind. The two strangers he had seen at the bar were in the alley, guns lined on him. He stepped away from the door,

breathing hard.

"Now you're being smart," Brown said. "Hurry it up, Chunk."

Duvane went out of the room, Spain behind him. It was Brown who pushed the door shut, dark face filled with triumph. He said, "I haven't seen Jappert around town for quite a spell, Fargo, but even if he was, he couldn't touch us."

"Better be damned sure you're right," the cattle dealer muttered. "This was your idea. I wanted to keep going. Remember?"

"And pass up a gold mine?" Brown laughed shortly. "I'll tell you how it is. We're not wanted in Colorado, Sam. You remember that. Likewise remember that Ed Stack is the law around here, and Ed isn't gonna bother us."

"How do you figure that?" Brett asked hoarsely.

"Why now," Brown said, "Ed's the kind who lets sleeping dogs lie. It's just you and Jappert; Fargo, and Jappert isn't around."

Brett, thinking of the men in the alley, knew that one thing was certain. Unless something happened before Duvane and Spain got back from Wishbone, Brett Fargo wouldn't be around, either.

Brett remained standing, shoulder blades against the wall, gaze moving from Naco Brown to Inman and back to Brown. Inman's round florid face showed the fear that gripped him, but Brown was not the kind of man who knew what fear was. He had thought this game through, and waited more than a year to collect the prize, a fortune that might well go over a hundred thousand dollars.

"Even if you pull it off here," Brett said suddenly, "Jappert will nail you when you get to Midas City with the herd."

Brown had taken a chair at the table. His thin lips curled into a smile. His left hand came up to flick a bit of dust off the lapel of his coat; his right hand remained on the green baize-covered table, the big diamond glittering in cold brilliance.

"You underestimate me, friend," he said coolly. "The first thing was for Sam to assume the identity of a cattle buyer, which he did and did well. I put in some time as a gambler, a square one, and I flatter myself that I have some friends in Midas City. I'll simply return and pick up where I left off until the cattle are sold. We'll move out in the spring and resume our trip to Argentina. All it takes is a cool head. Remember that, Sam."

"What about Jappert?" Brett asked.

Brown laughed easily. "Who will believe him, one man, unknown in this country, and not a very persuasive one at that. He plays a drunk well, but it will take more than a drunk to convince the Midas City sheriff that we're crooks. You see, both Sam and I made it a point to become friends with the sheriff. Last year Sam delivered cattle at a reasonable price. This year the deal will be worthwhile. The price will be less reasonable and we're getting a thousand steers for nothing." He motioned to the I. O. U.'s. "A gambling debt, but no one in Midas City will know that."

Inman pulled a cigar out of his coat pocket and bit off the end. "You make it sound good, Naco," he said sourly.

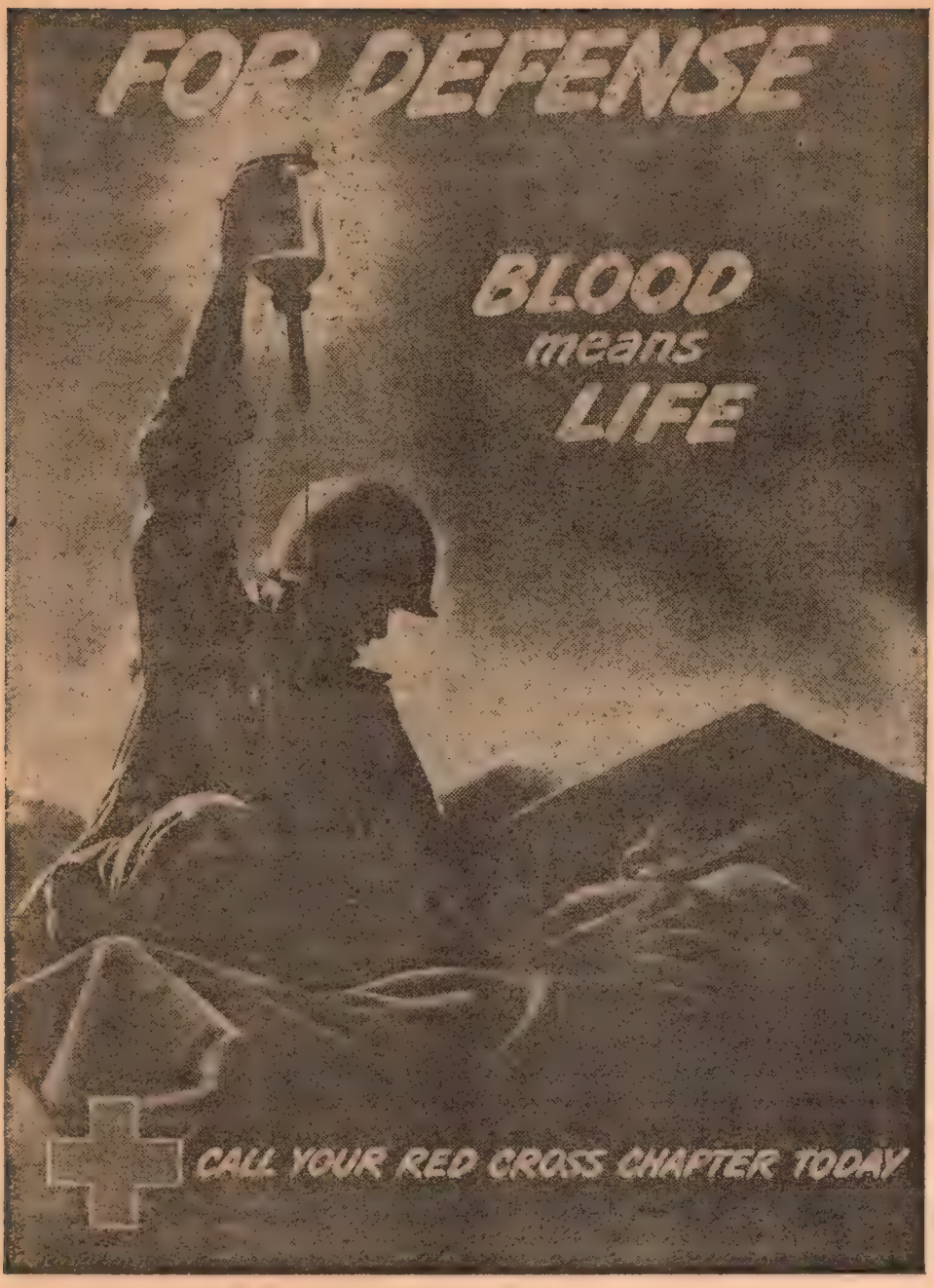
"It is good. It gives me considerable pleasure to explain to Fargo who has quite a name in these parts, an exaggeration, I might add. It seems that I have to explain it to you, too. Have I ever missed, Sam?"

"No." Inman fired his cigar. "Only takes one miss in our business."

"Oh hell," Brown said testily. "I tell you it's an ironclad cinch. Within a matter of days now the pass will be closed. Jappert will disappear if he shows up, which I doubt. Fargo and Duvane will cash in right here, and everybody will know why they shot it out. Fargo still has his gun, Sam. He will try to use it, but . . ."

Brown stopped, listening. A voice from the saloon yelled, "Where's Brown?" It was Jappert's voice, and an instant later Ed Stack called from the alley, "What are you two doing out here?"

A COOL head, as Brown had said, might still have pulled it off, but Inman was too scared to be cool. He wheeled on Brett, grabbing for his gun, cursing in a high frantic voice. The door swung open just as he pulled. Brett had no time to see who it was, nor to watch the men in the alley. He drew, his gun clearing leather ahead of Inman's. His first shot nailed the cattle buyer high in the chest, Inman's slug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driving into the wall an inch from Brett's head.

More guns sounded before the hammering echoes of these shots had died, from the alley and the doorway to Brett's left. Gunsmoke swirled across the room as Sam Inman sprawled back on the table and rolled off, Duvane's I. O. U.'s fluttering to the floor. Brown threw a shot at the man who had come in and was whipping his gun to Brett when Brett's second bullet hit the gambler in the head.

Brett had a glimpse of Jappert sprawled in the doorway, of Inman struggling to his hands and knees and tilting his gun upward for another shot. Brett let go again, blasting life from the fat man. His elbows gave under his great weight and he spilled forward on his face. Brown, Brett saw, was dead. He ran to the window. One man was down in the alley, the second was throwing down on Ed Stack. Brett fired, the bullet smashing the outlaw's right arm. Then Stack came running along the alley, shouting, "You all right, Brett?"

"All right," Brett answered. "Jappert's down."

Doc Hazen crowded into the smoke-filled room, saying briskly, "I'm a doctor and an undertaker. Which do you need?"

"Both," Brett said.

Jappert had pulled himself to a sitting position, one hand clutching his shirt, blood spreading through his fingers. "Hell, that didn't work . . ."

"Shut up," Hazen said. "I've got to get that blood stopped."

Jappert spilled over sideways. "Take care of him, Doc," Brett said. "I've got to get out to Wishbone."

Brett ran out of the room, ejecting the empty shells and reloading as he ran. He met Ed Stack on the walk, the marshal prodding the wounded outlaw in the back with his gun.

"Looks like we pulled it off," the marshal crowed. "Reckon you were right, Brett. Don't pay to let tough hands hang around. Jappert went to Placerville and got on the wire. He just got back with a description of this bunch that fitted to a T. We seen these two go around to the back, and then Duvane left with Spain, so we figured we'd better bust the party up."

"See you later," Brett said, and swinging into the saddle, thundered out of town.

There was no telling what had happened at Wishbone. Duvane was drunk enough to be ugly. Spain was as dangerous as Brown had been, and not as smart. Jill was home, alone except for her father who was too sick to do any good, and Brett was remembering the sullen bitterness that had been in Duvane when he had talked about the presents Jill had brought them, silver spurs for Brett Fargo, a damned old rag for him.

Brett had never made the ride into the canyon the way he made it now, and he would never make it that way again. He put his buckskin down one sharp pitch after another, cutting off the ends of the switchbacks and plunging to the road below him in a shower of red dust and rocks that went thundering on down to the river, wheeling his horse back along the road and taking the next turn in the same manner. One missed step would have sent him and the gelding down the canyon wall in an avalanche of rocks and dirt and brush.

He reached the bottom, dust hanging above the road to the rim, slides still racketing down the slope. He roared on across the river, water slicing out in long lines of sparkling silver under the driving hoofs, and went up the slope of the north bank, the buckskin responding with every nerve and muscle in his body to the urgency that was in Brett Fargo.

He heard the guns before he reached the bench above the river, and drew his own. He glimpsed Spain running out of the house and pitched a shot at the man and missed. Spain saw him then and raised his gun and fired.

Brett came straight at the gunman, saw fear break across the man's knobby face. Spain threw another shot that sent a streak of white heat lancing through his chest. Brett squeezed off another shot, and a second. Spain started to run. He took two long steps and fell headlong. Then the buckskin stumbled and Brett went sailing through space that had no end. He never knew when he struck the ground.

IT WAS evening when consciousness returned to Brett, evening with a western sky that was stained scarlet by the setting

sun. He tried to sit up and dropped back against the pillow as agony shot through his body. His left leg was stiff and unbending; his chest one great throbbing ache. He gritted his teeth and looked around at the ribbons and lace and feminine foofawraw, the dresses that hung in the closet, and knew he was in Jill's room.

He heard her steps and turned his head. For an instant she stood motionless in the doorway, a slanting ray of sunshine full upon her, dropping a sort of halo around her dark head.

"I used to have a book of Bible stories when I was a kid," he said. "Some of the angels had a light from heaven that made them look just like you."

"Oh Brett, I'm no angel," she cried, and ran to the bed. "I'm no angel at all."

She dropped on her knees beside him, a hand gripping his. He said, "You look like one to me."

"No I'm not. All the time I was engaged to Dan, it was you that I wanted. An angel wouldn't have felt that way, or asked you for a kiss when you brought me home." Jill took a long breath. "You've got a bad wound in your chest and a broken leg, but Doc says you'll make out fine if you get the right nursing, and I'll see you get that."

"Duvane?"

"Dead. So is Spain. They came in just a little while before you got here. Dan wanted Dad to sign over the herd. He was drunk enough to be ugly and Spain threatened to shoot Dad. I guess any man can stand just so much and Dad had stood all he could. He said he wouldn't. Then he told me about what he had done and that he'd let Dan run him to keep me from knowing. Dan began to curse him and pulled his gun. Then Dad shot him. I didn't know he had a gun, but he had it under his pillow. Spain ran out right then and you got him."

"Link?"

"He's gone, too. His heart. I guess it's better this way. I'm trying to make myself think it was. He made one mistake and he's been paying for it ever since."

"What about Jappert?"

"He'll be all right, Doc says. He told Doc to tell me that he didn't want our place. He said he wasn't one to settle down, but our crew will drive to Midas City and we'll get something out of our herd. We'll pay Jappert back, or give him a partnership in Wishbone."

Brett was silent for a moment. He remembered hearing once that some things are settled only by a batch of first class funerals. Well, there would be some here, funerals that should have come a long time ago. All but Link Moffat's, yet perhaps that was the way it should be as Jill was trying to make herself believe, for he had let his fear rule him.

Jill was looking at Brett, her hand that held his trembling. "Brett, will you be riding away after you're well?"

"No," he said. "Not ever, unless you're going along."

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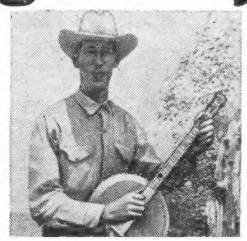

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